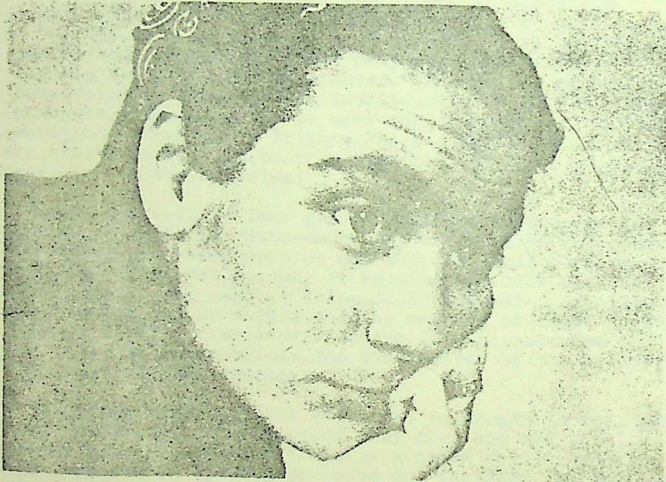


Introduction



Free Space
 A Perspective On the
 Small Group in Women's
 Liberation
 by Pam Allen

After two and a half years of being in the women's movement I understand that one of the basic needs which drove me to join women's liberation was a need to do meaningful work - work that encouraged self growth and at the same time was relevant to other people's needs. I have always believed in the basic value of the small group for women's liberation but my training and upbringing had not prepared me to think consistently or to write coherently. Specifically I have always felt tremendously inadequate to the task of writing and thus it has taken me two years of psychological preparation and six months of physical work to write my ideas on the small group. Many women have been asking what happens in a small group and why some people feel that it is an important structure for women's liberation. This handbook - its pictures and its words - is my attempt to communicate what a small group experience has meant to me and why. I have written it particularly for women beginning the small group experience and for women who are already in small groups but have not formulated a satisfying definition for themselves. Hopefully you will find the ideas stimulating and some of the concepts relevant to your needs. I hope that this will be the beginning of a dialogue between us for just as we grow and expand by talking with one another in our small groups so we will grow and expand by carrying on a dialogue with each other across the country.

I joined my group - Sudsofloppen - at its second meeting in September 1968. I was new to San Francisco, having moved from New York City where I had been active in women's liberation. I brought to the group a political commitment to building a mass women's movement. The group experience has helped me to synthesize and deepen my emotional and intellectual understanding of the predicament of being female in this society and the concerns which must be dealt with in building a women's movement.

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. We call this Free Space. We have had successes and failures in utilizing this space. Usually our problems stem from our failures to be completely honest with ourselves and each other - failing to accept the responsibility to question and disagree with another's ideas and perspective and saying what we think is an alternative. Our failures to be truthful have always

had a negative effect on the functioning of our group. Thus individual integrity - intellectual and emotional honesty - is our goal. It has been and is a difficult struggle.

Precisely because the group does become so meaningful to our lives as we start to separate ourselves from dependence on male values and institutions, it is a temptation to transfer our identities onto the group, to let our thinking be determined by group consensus rather than doing it ourselves. Although we are not sure that full autonomy is a possible goal, we do believe that our hope lies in developing as individuals who understand themselves, their own needs, the workings of our society and the needs of others. Thus we try to resist the temptation to submerge our individuality within the group and struggle instead to try to make contact with our own feelings and thoughts. Freedom is frightening and difficult to use. We are always struggling to take advantage of the Free Space we have created for ourselves.

We have developed four group processes to help us in our endeavors to become autonomous in our thinking and behavior. We call these processes opening up, sharing, analyzing and abstracting. They are our way of keeping in touch with our emotions, giving one another information regarding experiences we have had, trying to understand the meaning of those events, and finally fitting that understanding into an overview of our potential as human beings and the reality of our society, i.e. of developing an ideology.

The group processes are described in length in the third chapter. It should be understood that they are not totally separate processes. Rather there is a great deal of overlap but the emphasis in opening up is on our feelings, in sharing on our experiences, in analyzing on our thinking and in abstracting on our evolving theory.

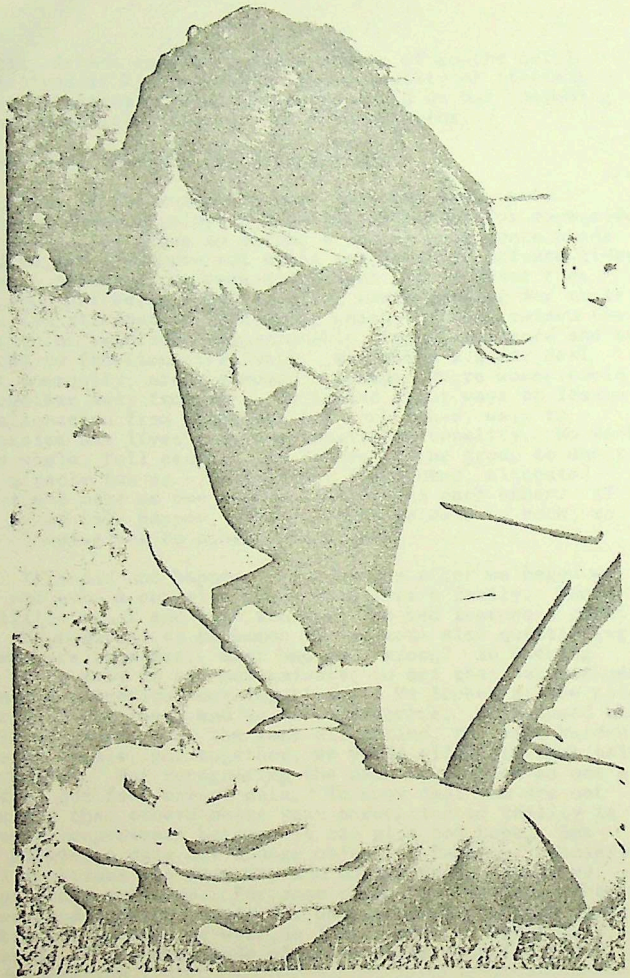
I have attempted to use the processes to describe my experiences and thinking as a member of Sudsofloppen. This introduction is my attempt to show you how I feel about my group experience. It has given me the courage and strength to write this handbook and it has constantly challenged me to be honest with myself regarding my own needs and the needs of others. The following chapters will tell what happened in our group, what my thinking is about Free Space, the group process, the group's relation to the individual woman and to the women's movement and finally my approach to developing a comprehensive ideology from which to operate. Lastly the Appendix includes two papers, one by a sister in Sudsofloppen, Pat Hansen, telling why the group formed and the second - The Sudsofloppen Paper - a paper written by the group as a whole describing who we were and where we wanted to go at the end of our first six months together.

The handbook is based on the following premises. First I believe that women are oppressed by society and by individual men, that they are beginning to rise against that oppression and have the potential of forming a social movement of historic proportions. However for this to be successful we must develop an ideology and learn to think autonomously. Secondly I believe that there are basic differences in perception between men and women because women do not have the social and economic advantages that men do. Although we may live intimately together, men and women relate in terms of men having the ultimate power. There is a woman's point of view, a woman's reality. It is the reality of an oppressed people and it is not acknowledged by our society because this would attest to the fact that women and men's equality is a myth.

I have chosen to write about one structure that has developed in the women's movement, the small group, because I think that the small group is especially suited to freeing women to affirm their view of reality and to learn to think independently of male supremacist values. It is a space where women can come to understand not only the ways this society works to keep women oppressed but also ways to overcome that oppression psychologically and socially. It is Free Space.

Jan. 1970

Pam Allen



Sudsofloppen

We were the first women's group in our city and were, therefore, very alone in finding definitions for ourselves. I had been in a group previously in another city and another member had attended the women's liberation national conference in November 1968, but there were few clues from either of these experiences or women's liberation literature about what was supposed to go on in a small group. It was clear that there were many opinions and that many groups were doing different things. Thus we felt very alone, very much on our own as we tried to define who we were and where we wanted to go as a group. Our struggle to reach a definition has been very difficult and painful.

The early months of our group activity involved mainly individuals giving personal raps of feelings, hopes or ideas that concerned them. The group responded with support and/or questions. Sometimes the group as a whole would agree on one subject for a meeting's discussion, but usually people brought to the group whatever was pressing upon them. Our discussions, however, did have a pattern. They revolved a great deal around what approach we as individuals and as a group should take: a personal, inwardly oriented search for self awareness or a more political, outwardly oriented thrust towards building a women's movement. Because many of us were ex-"movement" people we had tremendous hostility towards the concept of organizing women. At the same time, however, our political backgrounds had taught us the responsibility towards others and an understanding that no real changes could be made in our lives unless these changes were societal. We understood that this would mean massive numbers of women on the move.

The anti-political feelings and reluctance to reach out past ourselves was rooted in the experiences many of us had had with civil rights, SDS, peace and Resistance work. We were all well schooled in the inhumanity of the left movements, in their disregard for the needs of individuals. Although justice and equality were the goals, the everyday reality for women was that of manipulation, insensitivity, and exploitation. We had no wish to repeat those contradictions. Many of us felt, at the same time however, a tremendous drive to meet other women, to reach out past our group and find that there were more of us, many more of us. Our strength would be in our numbers as well as in the quality of our activity and so we felt a strong pull to move outward along with an equally strong reluctance to do so. This quality versus

quantity debate continued for a number of months until we resolved it by recognizing the necessity of limiting our expectations of what the group could do but including in that definition elements of both concerns.

THE PERSONAL INWARDLY ORIENTED APPROACH

Many of the women who came into our group were concerned about developing a larger community for themselves. They wanted the group to become a family unit where needs could be met that were not being met in their private lives (homes - communes) or work situations. This meant that the group was being asked to offer women meaning for their lives (an alternative to despair which for some raised the question of suicide), companionship, trust, guidance and an impetus to function creatively. We talked a great deal about community; about a women's commune where women could be together away from men. We talked about ways to lessen our alienation from ourselves and each other, ways to synthesize our lives into one consistent totality. We wanted to be whole, full people. We looked to the group to enact this miracle for us - to take our fragmented, alienated selves and make us one with ourselves and each other. If this could only happen, then we would be able to work, to give of ourselves to others, to create.

This did not happen. Five months after we began we were not even a cohesive group much less a family. There was little trust and much tension. We had learned a great deal about ourselves as women but we were also questioning why we were together. What had gone wrong? In looking back it is easy to see our naivete; to see that our weakness was our desperation, our impatience. We looked at the pain and poverty of our lives and we were desperate. We assumed that if all of us who felt the same alienation, the same burden of being female, got together, we would alleviate that pain, that burden. But recognizing the pain in another as one's own does not free one of pain. To know that you are not alone and that others share your perception of reality is a freeing experience because it can give you hope. But this knowledge does not change objective reality. Society still functions the same way and on the whole, so do we. The pain did not stop. For some of us the knowledge that there was a societal cause for our personal problems gave us strength because we were no longer alone. But this awareness of the magnitude of the problem also increased our desperation.

One problem that we had to face was that we would leave meetings filled with the resolve that on a personal level we would be autonomous. We were very aware that

we had to change ourselves as well as society. However, we would come back to our next meeting full of defeat, loathing that oppressed creature who was still in each of us and who made it so hard to act independently, take risks, stand up to pressure and, especially, develop our own abilities. Our discussions of this phenomenon reinforced our perceptions that we were correct in seeing ourselves as members of an oppressed group, and gave us the clarity of mind to look even more closely at the male supremacy of our society and at the ways some of us acquiesced and even furthered that ideology. There were times when seeing how we and other women participated in our own oppression overwhelmed us with bitterness and resentment towards everyone with whom we came in contact in our personal lives, including each other.

We utilized the group meetings to vent our hostility towards men and found that after a while we were less obsessed with men and our feelings towards them. We realized later that this chance to express our feelings of anger and resentment was a first step in freeing ourselves from men's domination. We came to understand that there is a difference between resentment and anger. Resentment comes from feeling inadequate or inferior to others, especially men. As we became more sure of ourselves and the accuracy of our perceptions, we became less resentful. We still feel anger towards the oppressive actions of individual men but we are less resentful as they are losing their power over us. Resentment towards ourselves and other women has been more difficult to deal with. Until we understood what resentment was we could not face those feelings within us. We now understand that striking out at other women for being weak comes from our own fears of weakness, but that objective criticism (anger) is constructive and necessary if we are to grow in strength.

Our resentments took on other target besides men and the weaknesses in women. We also found it very difficult to deal with women who were functioning better than we. We resented their ability to function independently when we felt so crippled by the pressures to conform. Our own feelings of inadequacy made us want to destroy the strengths in other women, to make them feel and suffer the way we did. This varied in intensity depending on the individual and her own feelings of self respect. This tendency to want to ridicule other women was difficult to deal with because we knew these feelings to be wrong and therefore were afraid to talk about them. It has taken us a long time to work this out, for the dynamic was happening internally within the group as well as in regard to other women.

One of the key characteristics of an oppressed people is self hatred. Oppressed people take out their frustrations on each other. Once we were able to see this tendency to tear down the strong women as a sign of our oppression, we were able to begin to deal with it. We have slowly learned how to open up about these feelings and to accept that expressing our feelings - negative as well as positive - is a necessary first step in understanding the dynamics at work behind our reactions.

The liberating of the individual is as difficult and overwhelming as the liberating of a society. It will be in struggling for our liberation on both levels that we will liberate ourselves on a personal level. The personal and political approaches merged with this recognition; personal liberation will happen simultaneously with the changing of society, not independently. We found that only the women who were willing to trust that they would find personal meaning in moving out to other women, in struggling for all women's liberation, stayed in the group. The others left us to find other ways to personal fulfillment. Self acceptance was a prerequisite for remaining, for we had to accept the necessity of compromise and the magnitude of the struggle we were beginning. To stay with the group knowing that our actions and our progress would be miniscule compared to our needs took tremendous faith that the struggle itself could sustain us. Our faith was that within the process of building ourselves and helping to build a movement - with all the setbacks and failures that would include - that we would find strength to go on, that we could win our liberation. This intense relation to society would give us a central unity to our lives. We would no longer be drifting, relating passively to life; we would be attempting to affect history, to act instead.

This faith has been rewarded already. We have found strength and hope from one another. We think it is because we stopped looking to one another for meaning and began to struggle together instead. We committed ourselves to offering one another a free space for a few hours each week. That was and is our commitment to each other. What we have found is that the free space has become more than any of us ever expected it would be. By narrowing our expectations of what we could have from the group, we have opened up unforeseen possibilities within that definition of our purpose as a group. And by committing ourselves to struggle with other women we have found the beginning of an answer to our quest for personal meaning.

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THE POLITICAL, OUTWARDLY ORIENTED APPROACH

Although few of the group had an interest in organizing a political movement when our small group formed, there was always at least one member who spoke if the need for such a movement. None of the others disagreed with this need; they just didn't want the responsibility for making it happen. But the group did not exist in isolation and we were always being confronted with examples of male supremacy that touched us in our lives. Thus in this early period a number of us felt moved to act but always we moved out to women.

Eventually our driving need to extend our contact to other women who were thinking as we were, overrode our fears of being involved once again in a political movement and some of us initiated a call for a Bay Area Women's Liberation meeting. This conference, which took place in January, 1969, began communication between groups in the Bay Area and new demands were placed on our group. We made contact with a group in Palo Alto which was also very isolated and began an ongoing working relationship with them. Along with other interested women some of us began an ideology workshop, which was study oriented. Another conference was held in March and in addition, some of us had begun to meet in a workshop to plan for a headquarters that would begin to meet the needs of our budding movement.

Because of our internal conflict over our responsibility to other women and our fear of manipulating others, we did nothing to help new groups to get started except to call the conferences where these women could meet one another. We offered them little in the way of information about what we were doing or ideas about the group process. The groups which started existed very much in isolation. The few of us who wished to do so met together in the workshops, but all group activity was done in isolation.

All was not well either in this outside activity or in the group. The tension of the internal debate had not been resolved and new problems having to do with this outside activity were being brought to the group. Women not involved in this activity resented this intrusion on their time. However those women involved were plagued with doubts, and questions about the directions in which they were going and they needed a place to talk about this.

During February and March our group engaged in an evaluation of itself. Since the group did not have a clear purpose we were beginning to question the value of its existence. Almost all of us considered pulling out of the group. Each of us has only a vague idea of what we wanted

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the group to be but all of us were sure that in its present form it was fulfilling none of our needs. Finally one of our members wrote a paper analyzing the nature of our group, the reasons we had joined and the questions we would have to ask ourselves if we were to continue. At the same time a member who was in despair decided to leave our group because she realized the group could not help her to work out the problems that were confronting her in her personal life.

These two events - the writing of a paper by one sister and the leaving our group by another - caused us to take a serious long look at ourselves. The seriousness of our situation prompted all of us to commit ourselves to writing our views on the group and where we wanted it to go. Our existence as a group was in jeopardy and we realized it would take intensive thinking to work out a course of action that would put us back into healthy functioning. All of the eleven members of the group at that period wrote papers and it was partly through the experience of writing that we each began to make up our minds if the group was where we wanted to be.

Out of this writing process came a commitment within the group to begin to work on a coherent definition of the nature of the small group. This commitment took its first form in writing a paper for the Bay Area conference in April. We wrote the paper together as a group. Starting with the individual papers a few of us got together and drew up an outline. The outline was then discussed by the whole group and assignments by section were given to members. When we reconvened we were surprised to see how easily the sections fitted together and were even more amazed to see what we had in fact produced. (This paper, The Sudsfloppen Paper, can be found in the Appendix).

It was at this point that we took the name Sudsfloppen. One of our members had used the name in her paper and we all felt that the concept of a nonsensical name was good because it would leave us plenty of room to grow and develop. No notion of who or what we were could be derived from the name separate from the work and ideas we produced.

The completion of the Sudsfloppen Paper caused a second evaluation in our group. Whereas our first crisis had been that of not having a clear cut definition of ourselves, this second one had to do precisely with the fact that we had now reached a tentative ideal towards which we wanted to struggle. It was at this time that five of our members left us. All but one went into other groups. We were not what they wanted in a group. There was

not one member, however, who did not have to seriously consider whether she was willing to commit herself to the group with its new definition of itself and its commitment to moving outward. We were now down to six members but we did not waver in our conviction that we were heading along a path that was correct for us. There had been no alternatives offered and those of us who chose to stay felt that this was what we wanted to do.

Sudsfloppen failed many of the women who joined our group. We could not be what they wanted us to be. We watched women leave us no longer caring about the hope that sustained the rest of us. And from the protection of our own group we advised other women, who had reached out to us because they liked what they saw of our group, to start their own groups.

We feel that continuity is important, i.e. that women should start at the beginning with a group so that they do not miss any group experiences. We closed our group to new people after a few months. We felt (and still feel) that a group must have a consistent membership if it is to function well. After making this decision, however, we did bring in another member and later two sisters who came to San Francisco from groups in the East. We did not attempt to get to know each other however, assuming that somehow they would just become integrated into our group. All three chose to leave us for other groups after writing the Sudsfloppen Paper, however, and we became even more convinced of the difficulty of integrating new members into an already functioning group. Our tentative thinking now is that for a successful integration of a new person it is necessary that she has previously been in a successful group, i.e. has had a similar group experience, and that the group spend time getting to know one another emotionally and intellectually. This must take precedence over the other group activity if the new member is to be integrated.

SUDSFLOPPEN

Since the writing of the Sudsfloppen Paper our activity has taken three basic directions. First, we have continued to pursue and refine the concept of Free Space, first mentioned in this paper, and looking self-critically at our own development. Some of us have read Hannah Arendt's THE HUMAN CONDITION and found this very enlightening. Second, we have continued to try to offer perspective and support to our members as they work out solutions to problems they encounter in their private and work lives. We continue to feel that it is of utmost

importance that the group be a source of support during times of personal questioning. Lastly, we have been involved with other groups in beginning to build a women's movement in our area. We have left our members free to choose how each wants to relate to this growing movement but all of us have brought our experiences and our questions back to the group to evaluate and fit into our growing view of ourselves as a movement.

This last area concerns us. As a group we are functioning fairly well within the limits we have set for ourselves. But in the women's movement, our activities have not all been successes. We did open a headquarters and were evicted for non-political reasons two months later. This demoralized us but even more depressing had been our discovery that there were many problems involved in setting up a place which we had not anticipated, most important being that some women did not wish to use the facility. The ideology workshop meetings stopped in June because people were not doing the reading and the bulk of work fell to a few people. Most importantly we had not - and still have not not - worked out a way of integrating new women into groups which minimizes problems; nor have we worked out ways to help groups which are having problems.

Not all the groups have been able to evolve a definition. Many have floundered and are still searching for a purpose for their existence. Others have internal conflicts which they have not been able to resolve. Our reality is that only a few groups in the Bay Area function as we do or understand our reasons for being what we are. We can no longer naively tell women to start their own groups or refer them to a workshop which holds orientations and helps to convene new groups as neither approach guarantees results. We have no way of assuring an individual that her group will become what she wants and needs any more than we could guarantee that to our own members a year and a half ago. We are concerned about our responsibility to other women, however, and to groups which are unable to resolve their internal contradictions but we know of few ways to help. The writing of this handbook is an attempt to explain what one person finds valuable about the small group experience but it is no guarantee that it will have answers for others.

Perhaps the only truth I can say to others is that we have had to learn that progress is slow, our mistakes many. To heal and restore ourselves to wholeness and to help build a women's movement that could make this a humane society - these are goals which may well take a lifetime

before they are achieved. Our meaning must come from our hope, our vision, and from the comradeship we will find in struggling together. There will be set-backs and there is pain, but what choice do we have, for we can never be free except in fighting for our own humanity?

Free Space



There are three prerequisites to a group functioning as Free Space. First the group must have a stable membership; i.e. all members come to all meetings. Second there must be a commitment on the part of the members to the definition of the group as Free Space, as the place for developing ideas. This commitment takes the forms of attending meetings on time, informing others when one cannot be present, taking the meetings and people's ideas seriously, trying to contribute to the development of the group's ideas and goals by doing individual thinking, and being aware of the individual needs of members. Trust of one another, the third prerequisite, grows slowly from seeing each other live up to our commitments to the group.

We in Sudsopfloppen have built a trust; it has grown slowly out of experiencing the group process together and helping one another when we can. We come to meetings on time, utilize the meeting time of three hours to its fullest, and end our meetings on time so that individual members will not be drained of energy necessary to fulfill obligations in their daily lives. Specifically we were motivated not to waste time since one of our members had to leave to nurse her child. What we found was that this concentration of the meeting time on what was important to us has proved to conserve our energy and facilitate our growth both as individuals and as a group.

In addition we have tried to meet each other's individual needs in terms of relieving the pressures placed on women so that our members can have space to breathe and time to contribute to the work of the women's movement. One of our members took the only child of another member swimming each Tuesday morning all winter long to free the child's mother to participate in an on going headquarters meeting. Another time we were able to free the other mother in our group to go on a long needed vacation by assuming the responsibility of her children for four days. The group has given some financial aid to me so that I could put fulltime effort into the handbook and we hope to be able to do this for other members in the future.

When we say that we look upon the group as Free Space we mean that the group is used by us primarily to think, not to do work projects nor to enlarge our circle of friends.

The group as Free Space serves a very unique function for us. It is the place where we, having established trust through commitment to the group, can look upon life from a vantage point which gives us not only perspective but a framework for our thinking. Free Space is free because it does exist apart from our daily lives and is not directly involved in our struggle for survival. We are a gathering of equals who have left behind our individual daily cares for a short while and participate in the sharing together of our individual perspectives on ideas. We use thought processes and assumptions developed by the group as a whole but each of us, with our unique (special) viewpoint on life, contributes to that thought process.

Although Free Space can be utilized most productively when individual needs are not pressing, it can also serve to give women perspective for their daily struggles in their private and work lives. This is necessary because our society is male supremacist and we as women suffer the consequences both in terms of the lack of opportunities for self realization and direct suppression of our attempts towards full expression of our selves. Here we can gain strength, hope and perspective for continuing the struggle.

In its purer form Free Space is a place where women can begin to think autonomously. The pressures and values of the world are removed to a distance, trust and respect for each other exists and, most importantly, we have a common shared experience which facilitates our understanding of what we are trying to say to each other as we express our ideas. The group as Free Space allows us to transcend our condition because we have recognized and utilized our understanding of the condition of being female for our growth as human beings.

The group is based on the common sharing of our personal experiences. Our ideas are not isolated from our experience but grow out of the questions we have had to ask ourselves about that experience. Thinking autonomously is potentially possible because we can evaluate our ideas by whether they are valid to our experience. This does not mean that we generalize from our particular experience absolutes that attempt to answer the total problems of all women, but we do conceptualize possibilities for others that grow out of our own positive experiences. In communicating the concept of Free Space to others we are offering a possible structure that might meet their needs for perspective and growth. I am not suggesting that this is the only possibility for meeting the needs of women. Quite the contrary, defining the nature of the small group as Free Space shows how much this structure

does not meet all of our needs. We must question everything in a male supremacist society but we must also question our own tendency to want to find simple answers to the multi-faceted oppression that makes up our lot as women. Having the chance to think about ourselves and our movement gives us this perspective on ourselves as well as society.

For the group to act as Free Space a certain amount of distance from each other in our everyday lives is necessary. This is not only because we cannot grapple with ideas if we are consumed with negative feelings towards someone in the group because she let us down in our private lives, but also because it is necessary to believe in one another if we are to take ourselves seriously. People who live together are committed to fulfilling each other's private needs. The group is based on the faith that we will affirm each other regardless of our weaknesses in our daily struggles and contribute to understanding our predicament of being females and work towards alternative answers together. We have found that we are not strong enough to fulfill both commitments.

Group members have in the past lived together. They do no longer. We utilize the group process to gain perspective on our efforts to work out satisfactory living arrangements. We value this chance for distance and feel that it has been beneficial in our private life struggles precisely because it does offer us distance, hope, and an environment in which our ideas are respected. We talk about our emotional problems with people who have not been directly involved in these emotional experiences. This gives us freedom to analyze those situations with people who can be objective.

This idea that the group is a place where our ideas are taken seriously is very important to us. We have found that when we emphasize our strengths and have confidence in ourselves as a group, this has strengthened us as individuals. Our ability to put our ideas into practice has increased with time. We still recognize our limitations but we now also see our progress. There is no question in our minds that we are stronger, more autonomous women now than we were a year ago. We are learning to think on our own. We are convinced that this is a necessary prerequisite to functioning autonomously.

The Small Group Process

I have chosen to analyze the group process because we need to have an understanding of what the group structure can and cannot do. In addition we need to analyze our abilities and weaknesses as women. What we found in Sudsfloppen is that it is not easy for us to use the group processes: processes which we call opening up, sharing, analyzing and abstracting. We know very well how to open up, that is, talk about our feelings and problems to friends; we do it all the time. Some of us have learned to go further and share our experiences with the aim of giving others a perspective on their situations. Fewer of us know how to conceptualize and to generalize from experiences the common rules governing our behavior; and almost none of us knows how to think theoretically. The total process is not easy, but we think it could be fruitful for other women to undertake. Each of these stages is in itself a very real, very fulfilling experience. We found that all stages are necessary to understanding the human experience. In short, 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.

OPENING UP

This is a very individual need: the need for a woman to open up and talk about her feelings about herself and her life, and about specific experiences she has had. In the beginning of a group experience opening up is a reaching out to find human contact with other women. Later it becomes a way to communicate to others about one's subjective feelings - about the group, about the women's movement, about one's life.

Our society alienates us from our feelings. However, this is less true for women than for men. It is imperative for our mental health that we maintain and deepen our contact with our feelings. Our first concern must not be with whether these feelings are good or bad but what they are. Feelings are a reality. To deny their existence does not get rid of them. Rather it is through admitting to ambivalent feelings towards one's group - oneself - an individual woman, that one can begin to deal with these ambivalences.

Opening up is an essential but difficult process for a group. In its early stages a group usually fosters a feeling of intimacy and trust which frees women to discuss their fears and problems. This is because most women have been isolated and alone and the group experience is the first time they have found others who like themselves are frustrated with their lot as women in this society. Every woman who has tried to articulate her loss of a sense of identity to her husband knows the despair of not being understood. Any woman who has tried to explain her driving need to have a life of her own and sees her words falling on the incomprehending ears of family and friends knows the horror of being alone, being seen by others as some kind of freak. Any woman who has admitted that she is unhappy and depressed but can't explain why, knows the pain of not being taken seriously. Isolated, always getting negative responses to her attempts to communicate her feelings about her condition, it is very easy to begin to question herself, to see her problems in personal terms.

The group offers women a place where the response will be positive. "Yes, we know." "Yes, we understand." It is not so much the words that are said in response that are important; rather it is the fact that someone listens and does not ridicule; someone listens and acknowledges the validity of another's view of her life. It is the beginning of sisterhood, the feeling of unity with others, no longer being alone.

The early group experience of closeness - the honeymoon period as some call it - fosters opening up about one's feelings towards oneself and one's life. But as the group begins to function on a long term basis and the members participate in activities in a women's movement, it becomes harder to be honest about one's feelings for sometimes they are negative and may involve another woman in the group, which would create a confrontation. Yet such disclosures are necessary if trust and sisterhood are to become long term realities. Neither a group nor a movement can function if there is latent distrust and hostility, covert back biting and name calling going on. In addition an individual cannot be free to trust in herself and in others if she is suppressing feelings and allowing them to cloud her thinking and activity.

Opening up is a personal need to admit to and express one's emotions. In addition it is a group need in that no group can continue to function on a long term basis which does not deal with the feelings of its members. Unless women are given a non-judgmental space in which to express

themselves, we will never have the strength or the preception to deal with the ambivalences which are a part of us all. In addition, it is essential that the group guarantee confidentiality; that we know that the feelings we express will not be told elsewhere or used against us. This is a group commitment without which there can be no trust.

SHARING

The opening up process is centered on the individual's expressive needs, and carried to an extreme it can become self indulgence. However, there is another experience that can take place in the group which is similar to the first yet different, for the emphasis is on teaching one another through sharing experiences. Not only do we respond with recognition to someone's account, but we add from our own histories as well, building a collage of similar experiences from all women present. The intention here is to arrive at an understanding of the social condition of women by pooling descriptions of the forms oppression has taken in each individual's life. Revealing these particulars may be very painful, but the reason for dredging up these problems is not only for the therapeutic value of opening up hidden areas. Through experiencing the common discussion comes the understanding that many of the situations described are not personal at all, and are not based on individual inadequacies, but rather have a root in the social order. What we have found is that painful "personal" problems can be common to many of the women present. Thus attention can turn to finding the real causes of these problems rather than merely emphasizing one's own inadequacies.

Almost any topic can be used for the sharing process. All that is necessary is that women have experience in that area. Some of the topics we have used for discussion have been communal living, work experiences, movement experiences in civil rights, SDS and the peace movement, relationships with men focusing on examples of male chauvinism, relationships with women with emphasis on our adolescent experiences and how these affect our present feelings towards women, and our self images (how we perceive ourselves and how we think others perceive us). Agreeing on a topic, and preparing for the discussion for a week or so, seems to ensure the most productive sharing discussion.

One of our most fruitful discussions was on the topic of how we perceived the group. This included written papers on our perspectives on our first six months of functioning

as a group. This sharing together of our perceptions of a common experience taught us much about ourselves and the types of needs we have that are not being met in our daily lives. Perhaps most significant is the need to be taken seriously. We realized that until the group began, few of us felt worthwhile; but the group process is beginning to help us to take ourselves seriously.

The sharing occasions have shown us that the solutions to our problems will be found in joining with other women, because the basis of many of our problems is our status as women. It was not only sharing the stories of our childhood, school, marriage and work experiences which led us to this realization. It was as much the positive feelings, the warmth and comradeship of the small group which reinforced the conviction that it is with other women both now and in the future that solutions will be found. The old stereotypes that women can't work together and don't like one another are shown to be false in practice.

After sharing we know that women suffer at the hands of a male supremacist society and that this male supremacy intrudes into every sphere of our existence, controlling the ways in which we are allowed to make our living and the ways in which we find fulfillment in personal relationships. We know that our most secret, our most private problems are grounded in the way women are treated, in the way they are taught to act and in the way women are allowed to live. Isolation turns frustration into self doubt; but joining together gives women perspective that can lead to action. Through sharing they can see that they have been lied to, and begin to look critically at a society which so narrowly defines the roles they may play. But before they can take their destinies into their own hands, they must understand the objective condition of women and the many forms that oppression takes in the lives of women.

ANALYZING

A third stage now takes place in the group: the experience of analyzing the reasons for and the causes of the oppression of women. This analysis rises out of the questions which are posed by the basic raw data of the opening up and sharing periods. It is a new way of looking at women's condition: the development of concepts which attempt to define not only the why's and how's of our oppression but possible ways of fighting that oppression. Because the analysis takes place after the sharing of individual examples of oppression, it is based on a female

understanding of the reality of women's condition.

This period is important because it is the beginning of going beyond our personal experiences. Having gained a perspective on our lives through the sharing process, we now begin to look at women's predicament with some objectivity. This new approach is difficult for many of us as our lives as women 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. This is a new and difficult procedure to learn.

In analyzing the role the group has played in our lives we have come to understand about the ways in which women are kept from feeling they are worthwhile. We have discussed the need to have a social identity and how women are prevented from acquiring one. Women's roles as wife and mother have been analyzed. We have come to see that women are relegated to a private sphere, dependent both psychologically and financially on their husbands. The group is a first step in transcending the isolation. Here sometimes for the first time in her life a woman is allowed an identity independent of a man's. She is allowed to function intellectually as a thinker rather than as a sex object, servant, wife or mother. In short, the group establishes the social worth of the women present, a necessity if women are to take themselves seriously.

We have had to face realistically the inability of many of us to think conceptually. This inability comes from being encouraged to stay in the private sphere and to relate to people on personal levels even when working. We are training ourselves to get out from under our subjective responses and look at our reality in new ways. Although this is not easy for us, we see the absolute necessity of analysis, for our oppression takes both obvious and subtle forms which vary depending on our class and educational status. The complexity of women's situations necessitates that we bring information outside of our individual experiences to bear on our analysis of women's oppression. This is the period when questions can be asked about how the entire society functions. This is the period when books and other documentation becomes crucial. We have found that the writings coming out of the women's movement have been most valuable in helping us work out our analysis.

It is our contention, however, that this period of analysis belongs after the opening up and sharing experiences, for concepts we find must answer the questions which come from our problems as women. It is not in our interest to

it experiences into preconceived theory, especially one revised by men. This is not only because we must suspect all male thinking as being male supremacist, but also because we must teach ourselves to think independently. Our thinking must grow out of an understanding of our condition as women if it is to answer our needs as women.

We must look at the component parts that make up our total oppression, analyzing these before an over-all theory can be agreed upon. It is absurd for us to claim catch-all solutions when we do not yet know the totality of the problem. Our theories must grow out of our questions if they are to be internalized and if we are to have the tools to look objectively at new experience and analyze that correctly. Thus a period of analysis will come after each new experience and will add new thinking to an ever growing ideology.

ABSTRACTING

A synthesis of the analysis is necessary, and at some point decisions must be made as to priorities in problems and approach. However, before this can happen a certain distance must exist between us and our concerns. We call this abstracting experience Free Space. When we remove ourselves from immediate necessity, we are able to take the concepts and analysis we have developed and discuss abstractly. We are able to look at the totality of the nature of our condition, utilizing the concepts we have formulated in our discussions of the many forms our oppression takes. Rather we begin to build (and to some extent, experience) a vision of our human potential. This does not mean we become more like men. Rather we come to understand what we could be if freed of social oppression.

We are only beginning to experience Free Space, abstracting, now that we have a year of opening up, sharing and analyzing behind us. We are beginning to see how different institutions fulfill or prevent the fulfillment of human needs, how they work together and how they must be changed. We are beginning to gain an overview of what type of women's movement will be necessary to change the institutions that oppress women. Specifically we have begun to have a clear understanding of what the role the small group can and cannot play in this social revolution. It is clear to us that the small group is neither an action-oriented political group in and of itself nor is it an alternative family unit. Rather it is a place where we can rise above our particular necessities. We are members of humanity looking at the human condition rather than only our personal predicaments. This is where ideology can develop and out of this emerging ideology will come a program

grounded in a solid understanding of women's condition which will have its roots, but not its totality, in our own experience. Intellectually this is the most exciting stage. It is a joy to learn to think, to begin to comprehend what is happening to us. Ideas are experiences in themselves freeing, joyous experiences which give us the framework for formulating proposals for action.

It is important to stress that opening up, sharing, analyzing and abstracting are not limited to certain periods of time. One never completes any of the processes. Opening up is not limited to the past and one does not graduate through the various processes until one is only abstracting to the exclusion of all else. Analyzing and abstracting are only valid processes if they continue to be rooted in the present feelings and experiences of participants. The order may be fixed but the processes themselves are ongoing.

PITFALLS

This process for understanding experiences does not occur easily and cannot occur if the demands for opening up and sharing are so great that there is no room for working the experience into concepts and then into theory. (One of the reasons we feel that the small group structure is a good base for developing ideology is that many groups can be at different stages at different times. Women who are new to our movement can participate in the opening up and sharing processes together in a separate group and not be prevented from having the initial experiences by coming into a group which is an already functioning unit.) But it is not only new people who can keep a group operating on the first two levels. Fear and/or inability to believe that the causes of women's problems are rooted in society can prevent women from transcending their individual situations. Women who are unable to receive enough ego support through the opening up and sharing process may fear abstraction because they think it is alienating them from themselves. This has happened with us and has led us to think that a certain amount of self acceptance is necessary before a group can experience Free Space. The opening up experience is necessary but in and of itself cannot give women a full understanding of their problems. But if opening up is what a particular woman continues to need, she should not be prevented from having it. However, it may be that it should take place outside the group; in therapy, for example.

It is not only women who cannot talk about anything



but their subjective situations who can be detrimental to the group process. As destructive are the women who refuse to deal with the forms of oppression takes in their personal lives and instead demand that the group begin its approach to the problems of women on the level of analysis. The contradiction implied in a refusal to talk about one's own oppression but a willingness to analyze women's total situation are of utmost importance to the development of an ideology for a women's movement. Invariably we find that the women who have an over-all answer to the problems of women but refuse to confront the every day examples of male supremacy in intimate male-female relationships either come from male-dominated political organizations or live with men who do. It is not inconsequential how a woman deals with herself and her individual problems as a woman. If men dominate her in her private life the chances are her analysis also comes from men. The sharing process teaches us that individual men benefit from our oppression and even more importantly function and think in male supremacist ways. Thus their thinking, even when filtered through a woman, cannot be accepted without thorough questioning.

We see the group process as valuable precisely because it starts with our own oppression. Women who cannot deal with the peculiar forms of oppression takes in their private lives are highly suspect when they begin to talk about forms of oppression that afflict other women. The peculiarities and severity of oppression vary according to class and race and women of different classes and races must first deal with the particular forms of oppression found in their own situations. If we cannot face our own problems we have no right to claim that we have answers to other people's problems.

The total group process is not therapy because we try to find the social causes for our experiences and the possible programs for changing these. But the therapeutic experience of momentarily relieving the individual of all responsibility for her situation does occur and is necessary if women are to be free to act. This takes place in both the opening up and sharing phases of the group activity and gives us the courage to look objectively at our predicament, accepting what is realistically our responsibilities to change and understanding what must be confronted societally.

The Individual And The Small Group

Women are socialized to view themselves in relation to others, not in relation to themselves. We are not raised to be autonomous individuals capable of understanding the world and acting on that understanding but rather, to be dependent on men, their ideas and their understanding of the world. We are offered one main function: to be the sustainers and nurturers of men and their children. The world for most women is very narrow and revolves around the private, isolated sphere of the nuclear family. Interpersonal relationships are of utmost importance and it is in this area that women are most skilled, for indeed our very livelihood is contingent on our pleasing men.

For a woman to decide that she would prefer to remain independent and lead a life in the "outside world", means that she must face exploitation in employment and the possibility of living alone without a man or family. It is not the purpose of this handbook to discuss the economic realities for women today but to suggest a vehicle for arriving at an ideological alternative to male supremacy. As regards economics it should be sufficient for our purposes to note that the median incomes of both black and white women are lower than those of black and white men even though the median education of both groups of women is higher than their male counterparts. The majority of jobs open to women are in service and menial occupations; much of the work is repetitious, boring and hard. The pay is low and there is little chance for women to find meaning in their work, especially if they have no higher education. Women work because they must, not because it is rewarding.

This society teaches that women are to find their meaning in life in marriage and childrearing. Hence, a woman's status is contingent on her marital status. The employment possibilities being what they are for women, family life does seem to be a desirable alternative. However to live one's whole life in service to others within the confines of a private world of family and interpersonal relationships is dehumanizing and stultifying. Growth comes from expanding our horizons, not in narrowing them. In the home women's time is taken up with meeting the needs of others and doing repetitious, boring housework. Seldom do we have an identity outside our roles as someone's wife or mother. Our needs are defined by men in terms of what they think is meaningful to women, not by ourselves.

It is time we defined our needs ourselves. Our needs are at least threefold. First we do have a need for a satisfying, stable private life. Second we need outlets for creativity which have social relevance, i.e. which exist outside the world of our private life. And third we need a framework for perceiving our reality, an ideology based on the premise of our self worth as individuals who are women.

The needs of a private life are what are usually considered the primary needs; shelter, food, companionship, understanding and sex (which has to be in a spirit of stability and intimacy). Usually these find some fulfillment in the family structure (communal as well as nuclear) but I would also include the needs for friendship, fellowship, and play which find expression outside intimate living arrangements as well. Living arrangements are satisfactory in terms of how many of the above needs are being met. Although these needs can never be fully satisfied since the oppression of women very much pervades the private realm where women are unpaid domestic and sexual servants; the establishment of some type of satisfactory living arrangement is a basic individual need. Each woman must decide what compromises she will or will not make in order to have these needs met. The group defined as Free Space would not meet these needs, nor would the group tell an individual woman what compromises she can or cannot make. Although the group can help her gain perspective as to the possibilities open to her, each woman must in the end decide for herself if the price she pays in terms of losing independence and autonomy by living with a man or men is worth what she gains for her own needs and the needs of her children. Women who choose not to live with men will need to work out other ways of having these needs met for society will give them no help.

A second form of individual experience necessary if we are to be full people is the experience of actualizing ourselves in work which is not only meaningful to ourselves but has meaning to others as well. As women this process is denied us almost totally. Creative work can take many forms but involves achievement, self discipline, autonomy and the ability to function in a social context. It is important not only because it contributes to the good of others but also because in taking place in a larger world context, it allows us to transcend our own subjective lives and function on the level of skills and ideas. It is this lack of opportunity to do socially relevant work which makes women's home lives doubly oppressive, for not only are we the servants of husband and children but we have no social outlets for our creativity. (Childrearing was once work
Use of Free Space.

that was socially valued if not socially fulfilling. Large families, however, are no longer economic necessities and are disfunctional both in terms of mobility and in limiting the population growth. (Thus in the one meaningful aspect of women's role is losing its meaning.)

Again the group is not the place for this human need to be productive to be fulfilled. Contributing to the group process does not replace this need to contribute to the world at large. That is one reason we need a women's movement. With very few exceptions individual women will not be able to find the opportunity to contribute in productive ways to society or be able to affect concrete changes and do work which has relevance or bearing upon it within society's institutions. Jobs do not exist for women because this society is not predicated on valuing the needs of people. Giving a few women token jobs will not change that. For us meaningful work must take the form of changing society itself.

The third need that women share with all humans is the need for a framework from which to operate. We as individuals need a way to understand our experiences and the world around us. This includes understanding the interrelations between economic reality and human nature. The society in which we live has an ideology which it teaches its young. It is a justification for economic control being in the hands of a few. It is a white male supremacist ideology because it justifies the exploitation of women and nonwhites for the benefit of white males.

Women's nature is defined in terms of the needs of white males, not in terms of the needs of women. We need an ideology that is pro-woman, that affirms our reality. We need this ideology so that we can begin to become autonomous from the white male supremacist values of our society and begin to operate from a framework which affirms the worth of all people and their rights to full and equal lives. We need to be able to make decisions in terms of what is best for us as women.

The small group is a structure which can offer women a place to build such an ideology. The group can offer us a reference point from which to operate. Such an ideology will be directly related to the reality of being human as women experience it. I am speaking here not only of perspective but indeed a whole framework for viewing the world, our society and our place in it. It is imperative that women do evolve an ideology if they are ever to become autonomous and capable of acting independently. This

As long as women stay in -26- from one another they can be led to believe that their problems arise

will not come easily but the small group process is well suited towards helping this to happen.

It is important that I stress that I do not mean the group will develop this ideology for its members. If we are to become autonomous thinkers, each individual must work out her own framework for herself. The group offers a space and a structure for individuals to use but the basic growth is as individuals. The goal of the group should not be to force each member into one mold. Nor should it allow its members to forgo the struggle of learning to think by allowing them to unquestioningly adopt someone else's ideas. Rather the group experience is stimulus to self growth. Differences should be explored, alternative perspectives encouraged for our goal is autonomous women, not women dependent on a group for ideology. This means that each individual must do her own work and thinking. Although there may seem to be many differences within a group, I think that a lot of these will prove to be individual perspectives of the same reality. In addition, the group does not exist in isolation from society and our understanding will grow closer as we work together to confront the inequalities of our society. We are all women struggling together. We all confront the same society with its contradictions. Sharing many individual perspectives will give us all a broader framework. But if we are to be capable of acting and thinking independently we must reach this ideology individually.

THE SMALL GROUP STRUCTURE

It is significant to note that small groups of women have been forming all over the country during the last two and a half years, many times not knowing much about one-another. The reasons for the use of this structure are fairly clear. The small group facilitates the direct participation of all members present and inhibits speeches, ego games, superficial thinking and the railroading of ideas. This form, which avoids the alienating games of past political meetings but also the isolation of the one-to-one discussion, has been misunderstood by outsiders precisely because they want to fit it into a preconceived framework of ideas. The small group is neither group therapy nor traditional political discussion removed from the realities of every day life; rather it is a mechanism suited to enabling women to reach an independent analysis of society which is rooted in their own experience. It is a new structure which sees its realization in the use of Free Space.

My analysis of why women need the small group structure and what function it can serve in the ongoing battle for the liberation of women comes directly out of my experience in New York City and in Sudsloppen. What drove us to a group was a need for help in actualizing ourselves in the face of oppression both in our private lives and in our lack of meaningful work. Thus it was for personal needs that women came to the groups. We needed and wanted contact with other women. There are at least three reasons why small groups fill women's needs as they emerge from this isolation. First women are denied a social identity and have no other way of articulating their needs in a social context. Second, most women question their own abilities and therefore do not trust their ideas which have been developed in isolation from other women. Because of this past isolation it is imperative that women have a chance to share their experiences with other women so that they will see that their problems are social in origin rather than personal inadequacies. Third only by removing themselves from male domination will women have the chance to find their identities as social beings since individual men benefit from their not having identities in the first place. Women need to set up alternative reference groups to society if they are to free themselves from social coercion. That alternative reference group can be the small group.

Self-doubt, arising out of our internalization of male values, prevents us from believing in our own ideas and therefore inhibits our participation in large groups. This problem of self image (our hatred of ourselves because we are women and supposedly inferior) cannot be helped by trying to compete on male terms. Organizations dominated by such thinking will only further self doubt or repudiation of the female in oneself. The small women's group affords women the opportunity of exploring both their present situation and their potential within a framework which strengthens our self images by showing us that we are not alone in our frustrations. We see that other women also have questions about themselves but most importantly we find that we have more to say to each other and to learn from each other than we did in our other social experiences. In other words, we begin to see that the other was indeed a male game not being played for our benefit; thus we would always be on the losing end. The coming together of women to talk of their condition as women in a male supremacist society can serve to increase the individual woman's estimation of herself.

As long as women stay isolated from one another they can be led to believe that their problems arise

out of personal inadequacies that have only to do with themselves. It is imperative that women meet together if they are to see the social causes of their problems, even those most personal problems between themselves and their husbands and boyfriends as well as the problems arising from confining stereotyped role expectations. Since most women are isolated by virtue of being single or in the nuclear family, the small group affords the opportunity to relate to other women in a political context which is not too threatening. We must remember that women are not trained to act independently in groups, only to react. Thus it is important that we do not make the mistake of structuring our activities in ways which inhibit our development by granting dominance to those who are already most skilled in attributes of intellectualism, and verbal and written ability. If each woman is to be freed from her isolation, we must enable each woman to contribute to the discussions from her own experience. It is important to find a structure which facilitates the growth of all women in self image, creativity and in skills of non-verbal and verbal expression, analysis and conceptualization. The small group process, which starts with women's own experience as the most valid information on which to build an ideology, can meet these needs.

There is of course a very good reason why we do not include men in our small group. The best argument for this is the experience of being in a group without men. It is not just that men dominate meetings, using meetings as a place to fulfill their ego needs for power and authority, but also that women, having been trained to view themselves as inferior to men, tend to look to men for guidance and truth. Only by removing men could we show ourselves that we could think on our own. What we found was that not only could we respect and learn from one another, but that the meetings were more fruitful and enlightening than when men were present. We've tried both and we prefer all woman meetings.

We no longer keep men out of our meetings because we fear that they would dominate or because we fear that we would stop looking to each other for support and ideas. We do not wish men in our meetings because their problems and their needs are not the same as ours and we do not have time to help them work out the problems they face from oppression in this society. Men have always used women for their own ends and we are not interested in serving their interests any longer. If we free men in the process of liberating ourselves (and we think we will)

that is good, but our priority is the needs and ideas of women and we will not have ourselves deterred from this goal by men - who after all benefit a great deal from our second class position.

It is not in men's short term interests for us to liberate ourselves. Individual men as well as the men who control this society benefit from the oppression of women. Women are cheap labor and emotional and sexual playthings. Even the most well-intentioned man exists in a world which presumes his superiority; this clouds and colors his thinking, to our detriment. I would add that I think the small group structure might prove very beneficial to men in helping them to find their humanity. I think it is significant that very few men have seen fit to try this form. Men do not wish to assume the burden of their emotional lives. They have always used us for giving them an emotional life and they will continue to do so as long as we allow it. We cannot afford that emotional and time drain. If men are to become fully human they will have to assume some of the responsibility themselves. We have our own humanity to fight for. When we can agree on common goals we will work together but many times we may be in opposition. In a male supremacist society men can and do act as the agents of our oppression. This takes the forms not only of physical and psychological brutality but also intellectual manipulation and maintaining concrete economic privileges.

Since we live in a male supremacist society, the ideas, the very words we use are male oriented. If we are to free ourselves from this oppressive situation, we must first free ourselves psychologically and intellectually from the influence of men. This means setting up alternative reference groups and developing an alternative ideology. The small women's group can begin this process.

An autonomous women's movement will function to serve women. This can happen in a number of ways. In the first place a women's movement needs to begin to develop a counter ideology and culture to male supremacy, which will affirm the basic human rights of all women and all people, including children. Secondly it must find ways of meeting the immediate needs of women so that they can grow and develop their fullest potentialities for the struggle. Third it must begin a systematic attack on male supremacist institutions - which means every institution in the U.S. while simultaneously developing an interim program and long term goals. This last will necessitate preparing to take part in the leadership of the society along with other groups which are dedicated to the development of a society which meets the needs of all people, not a few, i.e. white males.

I think it important the people struggle for their own needs. We are, on the whole, middle class white women in our twenties and thirties. Our needs will be those of middle class women. A mass movement, if it is to represent the needs of all women, must reflect the needs of the most oppressed of our sisters. Therefore, the leadership of such a movement must be made up of poor women, and especially non-white women for they are the most oppressed of our sisters. A mass movement will be made up of many organized groupings of women, each group expressing the needs of its constituency and coming together to struggle for common goals. Our constituency is middle class young white adults. Hopefully we can form an organization of such women and then ally with other women's organizations to make up a mass movement.

It will take us years to build such a women's movement. We are in the first steps. At present there are scattered organizations and groups of women all over the country but communication and cooperation are minimal. These groups should come together to cooperate on common activities and programs, not refusing cooperation with any women's group on specific issues unless there is disagreement on that issue. Our role is to work with as many women as possible for the interests of all women. In our own area women in women's liberation have working relationships with the local chapter of the National Organization For Women and with Women Inc., a women's caucus in the Western Pulp and Paper Workers in Antioch and Stockton, California, as well as women's liberation groups in Berkeley and Palo Alto. No one women's group has the option on truth; there is no ideology which speaks to women's needs that has yet been evolved. Therefore we must consider ourselves in a formative period and that the ideology will develop slowly through women working

together towards the liberation of all women.

Ideology does not develop separate from action and programs. The definition of the small group as Free Space is based on this premise. The value of the small group is that it does offer a place to evaluate these experiments and to fit them into an overview. If the group is the place for women to develop their ideology, it would be most beneficial to the interaction within the group if the individual members were not all involved in the same political activity since the more experience that can be reported the better the chance for a comprehensive overview. In the same way that we value the perspective of our members that comes from their individual private lives, we in Sudsfloppen also value the perspective that comes from our members being involved in different projects within the women's movement in San Francisco.

In San Francisco the basic unit for women's liberation has been the small group. Our activities take the form of workshops and direct actions which are cross-group - which have members who come from a number of small groups. We have Bay Area conferences to communicate with one another and to discuss questions of interest to all groups. I anticipate that we will soon see the development of action organizations which will draw members from many small groups. I see this as a natural and healthy process as one of the strengths of these organizations will be the small group membership of its participants for they will have a space to evaluate the progress of their organizations.

If our organization of a women's movement is to be successful it must include meeting the personal needs of its members on some minimal level. Although there can be no thoroughly sustained meeting of personal needs while in a sick society, at the same time sick people closed off from their personal selves cannot create a society which will be healthy and free. Previously I defined individual needs to be the need for a satisfactory private life, the need to do socially relevant work and the need to think independently; to have an ideology. The small group offers a space for this last need and helps in terms of support and encouragement in the other two areas. A women's movement will need to find ways of fulfilling these other needs. In terms of private life needs this might be in terms of services towards helping women find satisfactory living arrangements (housing service), sharing the responsibilities of child rearing (child care), meeting other women (social gatherings), and solving personal crises (counseling and therapy referral). But the basic responsibility must be the individual woman's. A

women's movement cannot afford to divert its energies to helping individual women work out their private lives. The women's movement's first commitment is to the female in women: to changing the social conditions which makes being female so oppressive. It is only by changing objective reality that all women will ever have the chance to be free.

In terms of meeting the need in individuals for creative work, the movement can do this in a number of ways. The process of building a mass movement of women, of working towards changing our society and building an ideology and program for women, is socially productive work. Also, developing skills for the women's movement and offering services to other women is relevant work. Within a women's movement there should be numerous ways to contribute, but again the ultimate responsibility is on women themselves. The movement suggest and even ask for workers in certain areas, but individual women must make the decision to give of their time and effort. Productive work is not easy and struggling towards our liberation will be frustrating and draining many times. The work will be time consuming and dreary but we will have our hope and our vision and there will be rewards along the way.

It will not be easy for many women to work for a movement. Having always been in service to others, they may have a reluctance to give of themselves even to other women. For many women it will mean activity only in the small group where they can see rewards for themselves from the work that they do. I have found, however, that if women remain in the small group and the group begins to function as Free Space, that the time will come when a woman is both confident enough of her abilities and desirous of new experiences to begin to move out from the small group to movement activities. The time it takes will depend on the individual and it seems to be true that not all women will make the transition. It is important to remember that for many women the small group experience is first an individual experience in affirming themselves and their abilities. The move to viewing oneself as part of something larger and of identifying with all women takes time. I do think a minimum of self acceptance is necessary, i.e. one's own problems with self identity cannot be too pressing. However, if a women's movement tries to meet some of the basic needs of women, it may prove that women will be able to rise above their personal predicaments and commit themselves to a struggle by and for all women.

One last word about individual needs. A women's movement should encourage its members to grow in all areas simultaneously - the private life, work and idea areas. This means confronting the inequities in our personal lives as well as in society. How each woman chooses to make her stands and to make a more fulfilling life is her choice alone. The movement - and here Free Space is important - can help her to work out what is correct for her as an individual both in terms of relationships with men and children and in terms of the type of work she will choose to engage in within the movement itself. We must leave women free to make their own decisions for two reasons. First people do not commit themselves to struggle under pressure from the very people they are to struggle with. If we say we are for developing autonomy in women we must be consistent in practice. Second, our movement will have to function on many different levels if we are to be successful, some levels of which we may not yet have any inkling; therefore it is important that we do not straight jacket our members into narrowly defined roles. There will be many duties and roles necessary, just as there will be many individual solutions to the problems of living intimately with men. Each woman must make her own reckoning and answer to herself for the choices she makes. After all, she and not the movement must live her life.

If this movement is to be relevant to all women then it is important that we do not drive married women and mothers out by requiring of them the same type of commitment that might be possible for single women without children. At the same time women who choose to remain in stable family situations must recognize the validity of the impatience and intensity of their freer sisters who have no other commitments than to the women's movement. Women in stable home situations will bring a certain stability to the movement as their personal lives will not be in upheaval. At the same time single women and ex-married women will bring the anger and impatience that comes from trying to live without a man in a male supremacist society.

The political activities women engage in will probably be determined to a large extent by the nature of their own needs and the nature of the community in which they live. There are many ways to attack male supremacy. It is clear that economic exploitation and abortion are already two of the most important fronts in which the battle is taking place. It is imperative that women begin to evolve an overview within which to fit their actions. Thus again we return to the question of ideology and stress the importance of the small group as a place to effectively analyze and

evaluate our political activities. The thread that runs through all our activity will be our ideology, or lack of one. We will succeed in building a mass movement of women, of changing the basic fabric of our society, if we have both a human and realistic understanding of ourselves and this society.

This means among other things that we must always take the personal needs of women into account when determining actions. These needs should not determine policy, but rather policies should incorporate personal needs. It is important to separate the personal needs from the decision making process in determining what tactics should be used in waging the battle for liberation. Individuals need to affirm their social worth and also to relieve their anger at their oppressors. But the ways chosen to meet these needs must be consistent with our commitment to alleviating the oppression of women. Our energies need to be channeled in ways which positively affect both the individual and the total movement whenever possible. For that we need an understanding of the numerous ways in which individual needs can be met, an understanding of the needs of our movement, and an understanding of the ways we can approach our goals successfully. For this we need an ideology.

The Study Plan

The importance of individuals developing an ideology has been stressed again and again in this handbook. It has been suggested that the small group, functioning as Free Space, is where this process can take place. One woman cannot know the total experience of women even with the help of written material. However, neither can one group. What follows is a study plan I have written which attempts to give structure to group meetings and encourages cross-group communication through monthly "collective" meetings. A central idea of the plan is that if a number of groups discuss the same set of ideas all using the small group process, that communication and growth among individuals and between groups will be enhanced. We plan to use this study program in our group beginning February 1970, and to meet in monthly "collective" meetings with other groups using the same plan.

Juliet Mitchell in *WOMEN; THE LONGEST REVOLUTION* (reprinted from the Nov./Dec. 1966 *New Left Review* by the New England Free Press and the SF Radical Education Project) identifies four elements of women's condition, all of which she feels are important for a comprehensive program aimed at making a society which meets the needs of women. These four elements are production, socialization, sexuality and reproduction. We will take each of these four elements and spend one month discussing the ways women are oppressed in each area, plus one month discussing how the four elements interrelate. Each time we will use the small group process. This means we will spend one week opening up about our feelings regarding that element, one week sharing our experiences, one week analyzing the situation using outside reading as well as our own experience and one week abstracting. On the fifth week we will get together with the other groups doing the same plan and share together our analysis and evolving theory. This will take six months, with one meeting each week.

After this we plan to spend an additional six months discussing the same four elements and how they relate in terms of our liberation. In other words, how will certain job functions be fulfilled, what type of society would be liberating for all its members, etc. Again we will use the small group process of opening up (our hopes, our visions), sharing (our tentative explorations in living a more liberated life now), analyzing (how are other

societies structured, what needs must be met) and abstracting (what would a liberated society look like). Again we will meet monthly with other groups using the same plan.

A last two months or longer will be spent discussing how do we effect change; the interactions and weak points in the four elements and the necessary actions we must undertake. At this point we should have a very thorough and human understanding of women's condition and hopefully the beginning of a framework from which to act.

Two other things will be happening during this study program. We plan to leave time at each small group meeting for discussion of private life and work experiences. These should not be neglected. Information from both areas will help us in our study, for women's condition is not only an abstraction but a very real, subjective reality. Activity within our movement here in San Francisco will also give us leads as to effective and ineffective ways to organize projects. The small group experience is a meeting ground for all of our experiences as women; the study program is not divorced from this.

The oppression of women takes place on many levels. We are oppressed psychologically, socially and economically. The small group process will enable us to look at each element of women's condition in terms of all three levels of our oppression. The opening up experience is connected with our psychological oppression. Sharing combines the psychological with examples of social coercion. Analyzing combines the social coercion with economic exploitation and abstracting fits all three into a total framework, which includes the potentialities possible within a liberated life.

The class from which women come will partly determine the content of their thinking but all women share many common experiences. Most females are isolated from one another into family units which include men. And where men are concerned, all women are oppressed. Individual women have their female status in common but the ways they are oppressed in their home life (childhood and adult), their work and their psyches will depend both on their class and their individual opportunities to transcend that condition. Any study program that discusses the condition of women and has as its participants only middle class white females can only speak of the way those women are oppressed. Our study program will be limited by the type of women who choose to participate. However, our first duty is to understand our own predicament for then we will be clear about our motives for joining with other women in a mass movement. We will know not only that we are oppressed but how that oppression is accomplished.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS OF WOMEN'S CONDITION

Although we have not begun our study program I do have an idea of the directions we will be pursuing in the next year. One of the most important of these will be in defining the enemy. Women's liberation groups have been carrying on a debate regarding this question for the last two years. The question of who is the enemy can only be answered after an analysis of women's total condition; the answer will probably be multi-faceted. As there is no comprehensive analysis yet, all conclusions are only one dimensional.- only concerned with one element of women's oppression. There are at least four enemies with whom we must contend: capitalism, men, ourselves and the state. These correspond to the four elements of our condition: production, sexuality, socialization and reproduction.

PRODUCTION: Women do unpaid labor in the home for individual men but their basic exploitation is at the hands of capitalism. It is the low paying, menial job possibilities open to women which makes them dependant on men. It is profitable to pay women less money to work; it is possible because women are not organized. Businessmen will not give up their chance for profits without a fight. In addition men like having women in supportive roles, not in competitive ones. Thus there will be tremendous resistance to integrating women into any but support jobs. The issue here is the right to access to equal work. The enemy is the white male capitalists who control this society and benefit from the way it functions. Since profits are their aim, the needs of people, and especially women, come second. Already there is an unemployment problem. If all women demanded the right to equal work drastic changes would have to be made to meet their needs. This cannot happen as long as profits are the goal of production and not the needs of people as a whole.

SEXUALITY: Since reproduction can now be separated from sex through birth control, sexuality is focussed on the relations between people of the same or opposite sex, and between individuals and their own bodies. The issue here is not only liberalization of the sexual mores for both men and women but also the basic questions of self image, equality and autonomy. So many examples of societies free of sexual inhibitions include the reduction of women to mere objects. This is true even of our own society, and true even of the alternative culture that hippies are trying to evolve. The enemy here is men, and women must fight to ensure that they maintain full autonomy in their relations with men. Only then will sexuality

be liberating for women. Otherwise it is just an opiate for keeping the slaves happy.

SOCIALIZATION: The care of the very young has been delegated to women. This is a very serious responsibility and ways found to relieve women and children of this inhuman bondage must take the very real needs of small children into consideration. Since women have done and continue to do the early socializing, we are our own worst enemies in this area. We have all the values and assumptions about the inherent inferiority of women socialized into us from birth by our mothers, most of whom preferred their male children to us. In addition unless we are very careful, we will transfer these same attitudes towards self to our daughters. The issue here is our understanding of the complex mechanisms of socialization which begin with the very young and can be transmitted in non-verbal ways. Alternatives must be developed which deal with these subtleties.

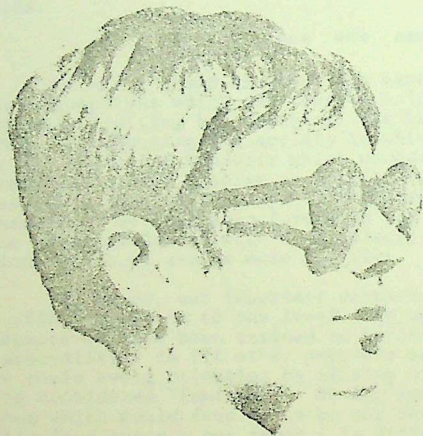
REPRODUCTION: With birth control childbearing becomes one option among many for women. However, this is true only if birth control, including abortion and sterilization, is voluntary and is accessible to all women and men, and if other possibilities for self realization are open to women. The issue here is who controls women's bodies and determines what kind of children will be born. Up until now women have been prevented from terminating an unwanted pregnancy except in a few privileged cases. But with concern for the population explosion rising, we will soon have to face the issue of population control. Meaningful work must be made available to women. Then, and only then, a voluntary goal of no increase in the population will be a possibility. We must protect the rights of poor and nonwhite women to bear children when they wish. The state cannot be allowed to determine which types of women should be allowed to have children. The enemy here is the state.

INTERRELATIONS: Entry of women into public industry on an equal basis is an absolute necessity for all human beings need socially productive work and economic independence. Values are not changed by will alone but are very much related to the material base of a society. However, at the same time this must be accompanied by concrete changes in the elements of sexuality, socialization and reproduction if women are to be free. The basic unit of society - the nuclear family will have to undergo drastic changes. Women will probably choose to work in actions which affect those elements that most oppress them as individuals. Thus young women will be concerned about reproduction, sexuality and production. Women with children will probably want more emphasis on socialization. Older women who have raised

children will probably be most angry about the limited job opportunities open to them. Students and teachers will fight oppression in education - the channelling and miseducation of female students which prevents them from having either the skills or the self confidence to assume responsible jobs in production. But all women, regardless of the particular element that most oppresses them, need to have an overview of their total condition in this society as well as an understanding of how this society functions with its wars, devastation of natural resources and exploitation of peoples both here and abroad for the sake of profits for the few - the white males who run this country for their own ends, not for the needs of the people.

The study program is only a beginning to our understanding of our predicament. I think it will be a productive beginning. However, I am aware that it does not deal with human being's need to dominate others. It is important that we arrive at an understanding of this need for power for we have no wish to work towards an alternative society where power will simply change hands but still be in the hands of a few. Non-white men exhibit the same tendencies to want to dominate women as do white males. Women, however, do show signs of cooperation when working together on their own terms and not in male terms. I hope we will be able to emphasize these tendencies towards communalism and cooperation that women have shown throughout the ages and to minimize the exploitative tendencies which come when women isolate themselves as individuals against other women. If we maintain our commitment to the progress of all women and not only ourselves, if we can change our values from individualism to communalism, there is hope.

Appendix



THE SUDSOFLOPPEN PAPER

In the last two years women all over the country have been organizing spontaneously into groups to consider the problems of women's oppression and to work towards total liberation. The structure of the small closely-knit group developed naturally from the early recognition of the necessity to cope first with the deep personal struggle over feelings of inadequacy and inferiority.

We see the small women's groups as revolutionary alternatives to those institutions offered to us by society: family, marriage, schools, work; all of which have failed us by cutting us off from participating in the productive forces of society. Reacting instead of acting, isolated from our sense of inner worth, our sense of self, our ability to communicate with others was destroyed.

In this respect the promises of the left proved empty. The white-male radical movement only mirrored the greater society in its refusal to accept women in other than traditional service roles and in its inability to understand and deal with the oppression inherent in this society's basic methods of personal relationships.

The group has provided the mechanism to analyze the nature of oppression on a personal level and from that perspective to a total socio-economic-historical analysis. From such an analysis comes the understanding of the need to commit ourselves to a struggle to win control over our own destiny, to move from the role of passive observer to that of active participant.

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This paper is being written because of our need to reach out. It resulted in strengthening our group by revealing the unity that even we were not quite sure was there. We shared a fear of expressing and writing our ideas but the work and commitment involved in producing the paper became a concrete example of what we are discovering about meaningful work. To structure something that comes from your guts is a very hard task.

We want to make it clear that the paper is a group effort. We each wrote a paper, met to make up the outline, met again to discuss the outline and split up sections to be written. When we met to compile the sections we were amazed at how easily they fit together without much editing. This gave testimony to our closeness. Several weeks ago two sisters came into our group from groups in the east, were integrated and were able to contribute significantly to the paper.

Our group started out being very personal and as time went on and things began to bog down we found ourselves trying to look beyond our particular group to get some perspective. Trying to define the group was part of this -- trying to see ourselves as a political form and not just Monday night meetings. We think this was a natural process.

Up to now we have been involved in a struggle between a personal emphasis that doesn't reach out versus a political emphasis lacking in substance. We've found a total emphasis on the personal a dead end. We don't want to lose the personal emphasis because it's an important way to measure the extent to which our ideas meet and come from needs. But again work, reaching out, is essential. We feel that the group used as a base for criticism and support is a way to combine these two needs.

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We are a group of women who have realized that many of the assumptions which our society holds concerning women are not only limiting but damaging. We have all faced crises because in rejecting the society in which we have been reared, we are rejecting behavior which we have individually internalized. We cannot despise society's conception of women without despising many of the ways in which we and our friends behave. Therefore, we have been forced to try to identify and confront the societal demons within ourselves, and to formulate conceptions which we see as more positive.

As women, our important contacts with other people were confined to a one to one level. We needed this protection because we have been trained to be other directed, shaping our personalities to fit other people's expectations (projections). We could avoid rejection by closing off those facets of not being considered "feminine". We are now trying to forge a new form which would free us to be our real selves. We see that this free space - our group - is different from other groups in that it is not a place where you manipulate words divorced from reality to manufacture a public image such as in the classroom or political meeting; this is not a place which ties you down to acting in set patterns; this is not a place involved simply in analysis of those set patterns, sharpening our understanding but leaving us bound.

Our group is laboring towards building a collective trust. The realization of this trust will come with understanding that we are committed to opening those potentialities we had closed off. We are involved in a tentative groping, exploration that we could open ourselves to passionate creativity. The move from alienation to commitment involves a terrifying lowering of defenses; all of us have considered pulling out. The bleakness of our lives coupled with a collective hope that this would be a meaningful alternative has sufficed to keep the group together. The life of the individual and the group are no longer segregated (alienated); as the individuals find new confidence

and sense of self worth, so the group is affirming itself by becoming engaged in serious meaningful action.

Many of us were becoming more and more demoralized as we saw ourselves unable to fit our new concepts of ourselves as women into our daily lives. The more aggressive would rush head on into confrontations or discussions with others only to be hurled back in utter defeat; while the more passive knew they could never live up to their new ideals and didn't even try. So we would come back to meetings hating ourselves for having failed each other and our ideals. Slowly we are coming to accept the necessity for moving one step at a time, working first on those aspects of ourselves which are most easy to change and accepting the need for compromise in other areas for the time being.

We now see the group as a place where we can isolate specific areas of compromise, look at the situations objectively and analyze the most productive form of attack. For those of us who rush headlong into things, we can come back with reports of how we fared and receive sympathetic advice on how we could have better handled the situation or even why we could have left well enough alone. And for those of us who withdraw from such situations, the group can help us to see in what ways we are capable of standing our ground.

So the group is a free space where we can withdraw from the daily struggles for a while and gain perspective on ourselves and the roles we play in our private and public lives.

This group has had a radicalizing effect on us. Now we understand in our gut something we used to give only lip service to: that there is no personal solution to being a woman in this society. We have realized that if we do not work to change the society it will in the end destroy us. We are able to look back at our adolescence and see that we each felt that we could escape the traps that the women around us had fallen into. But now we are aware that those escape routes narrow with age; there are fewer and fewer ways to keep from falling into the normal patterns of behavior. And so the group becomes an essential unit in our fight to create alternatives.

All of us in our group were already what we call "drop outs" from our society before we came together as a group. We were not, however, aware of the complex ways in which this society molds and conditions women to play very specific service roles for the benefit of others. Further we were not aware of how insidious these values are and how much these same conceptions of women had infected ourselves and others.

We began to look at ourselves and the people immediately around us to see how they had contributed to our dehumanization. Although we recognized the roles that ourselves, parents, teachers

and friends play in this process, we turned our attention specifically on the men in our lives. We recognized that these were the people who had the most influence on our ways of thinking. Then we went through a rather long period of venting our resentments and hostilities on the men who oppressed us in our daily lives. As we now look back on that period we see it as a healthy process through which we had to pass in order to free ourselves from our own bitterness and to gain an understanding of the interpersonal dynamics between men and women which work to the detriment of women. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the ways in which the male-female relationship works against us. We are not saying that these are necessarily conscious dynamics. Rather, men and women many times act according to socially prescribed roles which have been unconsciously internalized and, in a male supremacist society like ours, this is always to the detriment of women.

We are no longer as concerned with male chauvinism as we are much more concerned with our relationships with other women. As we have become strengthened in our concepts of ourselves we have, to a great extent, freed ourselves from the inordinate amount of influence men have over the thinking of women. We are much freer now to look to other women for support but also to recognize which female roles oppress ourselves and other women. We are beginning to see how we act as agents of our own oppression through seeing women as rivals rather than sisters and have become very committed to developing a sisterhood among ourselves as a group and with other groups of women. We see any political activity we might choose to engage in to advance our cause as women as growing out of this sisterhood.

We are aware that our own self-hatred is one of our chief enemies. Our group has had to come to the realization that there are certain aspects of self-hatred, such as the drive toward suicide, that brings the group to a point of impasse. We have discovered that talking about certain problems such as suicide is not as helpful as isolating specific oppressed ways of thinking and behaving which we are able to deal with. For instance, the specific oppressed ways of behaving that we have approached by writing this paper are our weaknesses in conceptualization, writing, theorizing and taking ourselves seriously. Our group then is hopefully becoming a place where women whose lives are so meaningless can begin to find meaningful activity.

With this new move, we're discovering a number of varied interests and talents within our group. At first this leads to a fear of disunity. But women discovering their unfulfilled potential is a reason for joy and not fear. Unity must come from working together and not like-mindedness. Working together strengthens the group to become a place that provides direction for the individual to discover both the ability to

meet her own individual needs and her role in meeting needs in the women's movement.

The group can become a place for us to get encouragement, help, and support to learn, grow and act and a place to come back to for criticism for we must learn from our mistakes. Since our group has felt the need to reach out -- through conferences and contact with other groups and individuals -- we are seeing that a movement is beginning to develop. We see the need now for more contact with groups locally and this direction is going to lead to the need for contact with groups nationally. As the movement gets larger it is essential that every woman answer to her group and always be a representative of that group so that she can neither be singled out for glory nor suppression.

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The revolution with which the group is related is the revolution that is happening in the lives of the members of the group. The basic changes that are occurring in self-respect and self-conception are the most revolutionary changes that women can go through. It is within the context of the group that these changes are possible because of the functioning of the group as described above and also, very importantly, because the group is a serious center where the question of women's oppression comes first. No other issue is given a higher priority.

This matter of priority comes out of an assumption that the women's groups operate on. That assumption is that a revolution is made by people rebelling against their own oppression; that the most faithful revolutionaries are those who understand the nature and roots of their own, personal oppression.

This assumption and the structure of the group exist in sharp rejection of the other group of people who fancy themselves the revolutionaries, namely the organized, white, male-dominated left. An often assumed premise which is seldom articulated is that in association to the traditional institutions which have failed us, once sought meaning in the politics of this left. It was in the "movement" that we had our last measure of hope. We believed that they were going to "make the revolution" for themselves, for us, and for all people. Again, we were disappointed. We were used by the "movement" -- our bodies as sex objects, our labor as shit workers; again we weren't allowed to be full human beings. "The movement" didn't fail us to any greater extent than the rest of society, it was only because we put so much hope in it that as a result we have come out of it bitter and frustrated.

In addition to rejecting the male supremacy of the left, the women's groups just as importantly reject its set of priorities which allow its members to consider themselves revolutionaries only in relation to the movements of other oppressed peoples. We believe that this is one of the important reasons why the white, male-dominated left functions more as a stop-over for most people instead of a life-long movement which makes constant demands on its members but also infuses their own lives with new meaning and hope. Because the white, male-dominated left insists on following its ideology with no recognition of its heart, it is a bedraggled affair with no soul, living parasitically off the real revolutions of black people, working people, and the peoples of the third world.

That each of these groups of people form strong and essential revolutionary groups is obvious to us. We believe that our relationship to them should be one of participation in specifically structured struggles which they ask us to join. We do not believe that our relationship should be as an appendage, attempting to influence their general ideological struggle.

We believe that our first task is to understand our own oppression and its causes and then, in that context of revolutionary necessity (instead of romanticism) join in long range alliances with those groups of people with whom it will be possible for all of us to make a total revolution.

We see this day of alliances as very distant. We have hardly begun the first steps in building our own movement. We are not even able to describe what we might think to be the nature of the paths we will take. We are clear in understanding that we need an ideology. We are equally clear in knowing that we alone will determine what that ideology will look like. We are patient to have that ideology develop slowly as we understand that the needs of women, which we are constantly discovering, will be the basis upon which that ideology must grow.

SUBSOFLOPPEN
San Francisco
April 19, 1969

Faced with a society that alienates all aspects of people's lives - sense of self, relationships with family, close friends; work, dreams, fun, sex, environment, etc. - we found ourselves wanting to merge all aspects of our lives so that everything we did and everyone we knew were all connected. That desire for community combined with a desire for intense, "honest" soul-searching relationships (verbal and non-verbal), and an awareness that men and women were different and treated differently brought us to where we were in September, 1968.

Some of us had been friends before the group began. We had discussed the problems we had as women - problems with men, chauvinistic things they did and said, pressures to do things to please them, envy at times that they seemed more free to act, to go out into the world, to be independent, whereas we seemed to be so confined; to go out into the world for us meant to do meaningless jobs, to find busy work and, of course, always to be back before dark because the streets are unsafe for women.

But as much as we talked about men even then we had begun to talk about ourselves as women, as separate from men - about sex and about our bodies - the shame, pride, fear and pain and probably above all, of course, the lack of ownership. It seemed that everyone owns women's bodies but women (Doris Lessing talks about this - becoming self-conscious of her body when she marries, realizing it is no longer hers) but we realized, married or not, our bodies had ownership by many: men, doctors, clothes and cosmetic manufacturers, advertisers, churches, schools - everyone but ourselves. We were caretakers, interested in our bodies only for the reaction in others.

At this time we had heard about women's groups being formed in other parts of the country, but our experience in the "movement" had burned us so badly that anything that hinted of organizing, meetings or objectivity was synonymous with manipulation, rhetoric, and ego-trips, so for a long time we didn't seriously consider meeting in any kind of formal way.

But finally we did decide to meet. Since one of us was involved in the Resistance (because her man was active there) we approached the other women who were there also. Thus we met together with about half the group strangers to the other half. Our first meetings were very subjective, not just talking about our problems but desperately trying to open up, to be free about talking and again, because it was all so subjective, each seeming question or disagreement was taken as a total rejection. Soon we found that the dynamic of the one-to-one conversations (which women are allowed - in order to be sympathetic helpers of men) could not be transplanted into a group. We had needs for deep

personal contact but we were putting too much pressure on the group too soon, not allowing any time for knowledge and trust to grow.

We were also coming to see that women have been relegated to private, personal ways of relating to people and that one area we desperately needed to enlarge was how to deal with others in more objective, idea-oriented ways. We did need a life of many dimensions rather than a merging of all experience. Specifically, we needed to act, defining this as almost anything non-subjective, not immediately personal or concerned only with our private lives and situations.

By definition we could not act if we were turning inward, searching for and demanding feelings. We began to see that the group as a whole and the individuals in it must begin to move out, and defined that as a need for ideas, study and reaching out to other women, not to talk only about our problems but to talk about what we should do. For many of us the decision to define the group not as a place for looking inward but rather as a place for reaching out, a stepping stone for action and ideas, was not an easy one. For some of us it was impossible and so we lost some women.

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