

***GROUP WORK AND FACILITATION  
SKILLS: A FEMINIST EVALUATION  
OF THEIR ROLE IN TRANSFORMATIVE  
ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION***

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**Introduction**

This chapter comprises a feminist evaluation of groupwork, which underpins many processes in adult education, community development and non-therapeutic self-help groups, but in particular, the women's community education movement. This movement has been well documented in many forms (for example, by Aontas, the Adult Education organisation; the Combat Poverty Agency; and Connolly, L. (1996), Connolly, B. (1997), O'Neill, (1992), among others). However, I want to look at the assumptions and values that underpin the way in which this education is carried out.

My positioning arises as a result of many years of experience as a community educator, and as a facilitator and group worker. I was working out of a package of beliefs but unaware of the implications of the processes I was using. On reflection, I now know that the pedagogical approach I employed was informed by a humanistic model of groupwork, adopting a person-centred, adult education approach and instituting democratic norms, on which humanistic group work is based.

Adult education is particularly concerned with personal transformation, which is wonderful for those who have experienced it. The growth of the women's community education movement has been hugely significant and, as Butler and Wintram (1991) say:

By defining a vision of how things can be different, women's groups have a dramatic impact across historical and cultural divisions. [...] Every time this happens, the world does not remain the same (pp. 188–189).

But there is a tendency for it to stay in the realm of the personal, especially with the self-selection of courses that appeal to a wide spectrum of marginal and excluded women. Ryan (1997) has discussed this at length, and it is raised by many adult educators for whom it is problematic when adult education does not pay enough attention to its social agenda, which includes the personal, but whose effect must also be seen at institutional and structural levels. We have looked to community development, community arts, to the women's movement, the labour movement and to education for politicisation to accomplish this shift from the personal to the social. However, as lifelong learning is moving into a more visible position, it is vital that adult education strengthens its theoretical base, so that it can establish its social agenda, with the help of feminist and post-structuralist thought.

This chapter will try to bring a different perspective into adult education, which it may need to respond to the changing world of lifelong learning. It will look at key ideas in social psychology, humanism, feminist theory and post-structuralist theory. And it will consider the implications of this analysis for the theory and practice of adult education.

### Groupwork Evaluation

It seems to be a good time to evaluate groupwork, on many grounds. Training for non-therapeutic group workers comprises, firstly, dedicated courses for group facilitators, for example, those offered by Meitheal, Community Action Network (CAN), or Continuing Education Programme, NUI, Maynooth. Secondly, it is part of training for those engaged in specific work with groups, for example, parenting course facilitators or Training for Transformation facilitators. And thirdly, it is integrated into courses for adult and community educators. Some of these inputs may be very short and concise, with little time for reflection and the unfolding of process. In addition, in contrast to therapeutic models, groupwork in adult education and community development is often unclear what its underlying assumptions are.

While practitioners are asked to be reflective, the lack of theoretical emphases leaves them without the tools to fully examine their perspectives. That is, the necessity for group work to be practical and applied means that the analysis is conducted without the framework of knowledge. And while many group workers are excellent, and have facilitated meaningful and insightful processes, when they are not aware of their basic assumptions, they are more likely to allow unconscious biases to prevail.

Groupwork contains aspirations to create reflexive, conscious interdependence. It endeavours, through examining the way in which people interact, to deconstruct power relations and to offer ways of doing things differently. It enables members to explore their ways of being and behaving in order to change them, if necessary. Changes may be necessary if members are blocking the work of the group. That is, if the task of the group is persistently undermined by the process within the group, or vice versa, it becomes necessary to change something: either the task or the process. It is at this point that transformation is possible. It is at this precise point that the personal can become the political and social.

In this chapter, I will outline briefly the origins of group work and examine the contexts in which it is used. I will examine some models of group work in order to allow for comparisons. I want to look at humanistic group work and to assess the issues arising within a feminist perspective. Finally, I want to evaluate groupwork as a vital constituent part of feminist pedagogy in transformative adult and community education.

### Groups in Communities

In almost every neighbourhood, village and town in Ireland, groups have been set up with the explicit aim of developing the community, to enable them to respond to needs within their areas, including employment, leisure, educational, sport, environmental and so on. A brief survey of the type of group work that is commonly used in non-therapeutic settings shows that it is most likely to be humanistic. Examples of handbooks include Centre for Adult and Community Education's *Facilitators' Resource Pack*, Prendiville's *Developing Facilitation Skills* (1996), *Groupwork* (Brown, 1986) and *Training for Transformation* (Hope and Timmel, 1986). Texts for adult educators,

such as *Facilitating Adult Learning* (Brookfield, 1986) and *Learning in Groups* (Jaques, 1984) acknowledge other types of group work implicitly or explicitly, but rely mainly on the democratic norms of humanistic group work, which challenge the power relations at micro and macro levels.

The move group work has made from an entirely therapeutic setting to mainstream educational, social, cultural and other milieus is now quite advanced. The language of group process is no longer stilted and odd sounding: we are very familiar with words like facilitation, leadership, conflict resolution, team work, group development and so on. This marked change has come about over the past 20 years or so as people come to recognise that groups can be a source of growth and effectiveness. In groups, individuals can develop their own potential. And groups are no longer to be feared in case they take over individual will and autonomy, reducing members to a type of lowest common denominator.

One of the most significant influences in this non-therapeutic arena, in Ireland, has been adult education, and more particularly, the women's community education movement. This has enabled the acceptance of group work as the main learning methodology and the consequent growth of interest in the human sciences, such as psychology and social studies, and in counselling skills (Connolly, 1997).

This phenomenon was slightly ahead of the upsurge of community development groups, such as LEADER, INTERREG, NOW and so on, which emerged out of the national development plan, funded by EU Objective One status (Connolly, 1997). Through these funds, every town, village and group had the opportunity to grow and develop, premised on group skills.

Where did this entire group work movement start from, what were the significant milestones and who were the key thinkers?

### **Social Psychology and Sociology**

Social psychology may be broadly defined as the study of how people influence, behave towards, perceive and relate to one another (Myers, 1988, p. 3). It is particularly problematic to define it more precisely, because it might impose restrictions on what is studied and how it is studied (Pennington, 1986, p. 2). Although it was considered in the

study of philosophy, it is a relatively new area of study and emerged as a distinct discipline this century and more particularly in the 1930s and late 1940s (Myers, 1988, p. 3). Social psychology grew out of a hope that social science could be used for a better society. Researchers at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations used an integration of psychoanalytic thought and social systems theory to develop theories and methods of small group work (Colman, Geller, 1985, p. 1). Social psychology aims to integrate the psychological functioning of individuals with the social settings in which the functioning takes place (Tajfel and Fraser, 1990, p. 17). It concentrates on individuals, how they behave, their attitudes and values.

The basic principle of human social behaviour is the convergence of mutual expectations. [...] Reciprocity of expectations is the very stuff of social behaviour. The ability to act in a reciprocating manner develops through interaction with others. [...] Through interactions we learn about the society we live in how to relate to it and, occasionally, how to change it (p.28)

However, there are many problems arising from this position. The key one, with which this chapter is concerned, is that it does not necessarily concern itself with the sociological context of individuals' lives. While the theories that underpin group work come from both psychology and sociology, it is perhaps the psychologists who were more influential. From a feminist perspective, this is even more acute: psychology is dominated by masculine thinking and thinkers. And it is quite difficult to shift from this dominant discourse.

### **Some Key Thinkers in Social Psychology**

Social psychology has many perspectives or paradigms and, according to Schellenburg, none is dominant (1978). Social psychology is a multi-paradigm science in that it has many fundamentally different ways of conceptualising its subject matter and engaging in research. It remains true however that the underlying discourse is patriarchal. Schellenberg enumerates four key perspectives, but I wish to focus on two in particular, which, while not complete, may establish a context for this chapter. The central questions, expressed in lay terms, that social psychology tries to answer are:

How do we learn to become functioning members of society?  
 How are we influenced by others' interaction?  
 How is our thought and behaviour affected by particular features  
 of society? (p. 7)

The **symbolic interactionist** perspective. This sees behaviour as determined within the social context: that individuals' behaviour can be understood in terms of the whole social group. This means an act is not just the product of the individual, rather it contains a large social element.

It is social not just in the sense that it occurs in a setting involving more than one individual; it is also social in the more profound sense that the reflected judgements of others are woven into the act's initiation and execution (p. 52).

The production of symbols occurs at another level, though simultaneously. Language, in particular, is central to the creation of significant symbols. And it is through language that we are able to develop reflective humanity.

Other people are present within us through symbolic representation. [...] It is thus through the development and use of significant symbols, first together with others and then only later within ourselves as thought, that we are the distinctive kind of being we are (p. 52)

The founding thinker of this strand of social psychology is George Mead. The main significance is the continuity between the individual and the social. That is, the subject has a degree of control over the self and society. However, it does not seem to look at the extent of that control or the social forces which determine who has control and why.

One of Mead's key contributions has been his look at selfhood and how it develops into organic society.

In as far as the child does take the attitudes of the other and allows that attitudes of the other to determine the thing he is going to do with reference to a common end, he is becoming an organic member of society  
 (Mead, 1934, p. 159)

However, he does not consider that we are simply agents of society. There are two aspects to the self: the 'me' and the 'I'.

The 'me' is the usual self, the presentation to the world, the predictable, consistent self. And because we incorporate the attitudes of others to reflect ourselves, the 'me' is the self we are conscious of when we reflect on our own behaviour. But the other aspect of the self, the 'I', is the impulsive, unthought out self. Mead contends that the space between action and reflection is the 'I' – the creative, innovative force that propels action forward (Schellenburg, pp. 49–51). Thus, integral to the development of selfhood is consciousness, the capacity to reflect and be aware.

Another key idea that Mead developed was that the creation of 'me' is due to the social role we play. He sees continuity between individual and society and this lies in the expectations that society has of us. Role Theory (RT) hinges on how the expectations of others determine to a large extent how we behave. This is crucial in the context of groupwork: the exploration of roles that we take in groupwork is vital to our understanding and reflection. How we are in groups enables us to develop insight into ourselves. This is a significantly different perspective; from being the observed or the object of another's study, to being the subject of our own lives.

Two points are pertinent here. Firstly, the self is constructed through the interaction of the individual and the social. And the nexus between the individual and society is acted out, intentionally or unintentionally, in the expression of the self. Secondly, we can reflect on this in a meaningful way through groupwork, as a microcosm of the social. However, the limitations of role theory, particularly in relation to gender roles, have been evident for quite some time.

Socially determined categories are constraining by design. The function of social roles is to make for an ordered society — at least, that seems to be the function. However, they limit possibilities. To create a rather literal example, in gendered categories, the role of housewife is constrained and in conflict with the role of doctor. The social status of each role, especially around society's traditional expectations of housewives and doctors, means that it is extremely difficult to do both, simultaneously. That is, they are imbued with values and these values take on more significance than the mere ordering of society. Further, as Figueroa Sarriera (1998) points out, the gendered social roles perpetuate the subordinate position of women. And it is risky to expect that we

can eliminate subordination merely by incorporating women into the same social world — with its attendant social roles — as men (p. 52).

In groupwork, behaviour is taken to be the outward manifestation of values and beliefs, which are formed, to a large degree, by social interaction: the expectations of society. But there is another part — the field of study opened up by Freud. This keeps well away from a purely behaviourist approach, obviously, and links to the second perspective I wish to consider.

The **psychoanalytic** approach. This perspective looks at the individual's inner life, the distant past and the recent past, as the reason for his/her social behaviour. The implication of this approach is that the person is unconscious of the reasons for her/his behaviour until it is uncovered with analysis. The main point I want to make about this is that, according to this perspective, the subject is not always in control of her/himself, that is, they are not necessarily and always the agents of their own actions. This is hugely significant in terms of being autonomous adults. Freud's theory of the personality is expressed in the tripartite id, ego and superego. The id is the unconscious reservoir of primitive energy, and the ego is that part of the id that has been modified by the direct influence of the outside world (1923). The Superego is a part of the ego that is not so closely connected with the conscious; it is created to resolve the conflicts of childhood development. From this experience, the child incorporates cultural ideas from her/his parents and, by extension, from society (Schellenburg, 1978). The main point, though, that Freud makes is that there is no evidence that humans have an asocial 'core', besides the primitive, instinctual id. The human self is constructed by living and life in society.

### **The Feminist Perspective on Psychoanalysis**

Nancy Chodorow (1989) has been at the forefront of the critique of Freud, particularly in relation to his view on women. She reviews Karen Horney's work on Freud, which proposes a model of women, not as defective and limited and forever a victim of being non-male, but as positive and valuable human beings. She looks also at Melanie Klein's position which sought to shift from the psychology of a boy's relationship with his father towards the study of the relationship of the mother with her children of both sexes. However, Chodorow considers

that neither Horney nor Klein succeeded in changing psychoanalysis fundamentally, and that Klein, in particular, was as gender and culturally bound as Freud. Chodorow's central contribution has been in supporting the critique of the notion of essentialism that is assumed in some aspects of psychology.

Essentialism refers to the notion that there is an essential humanity that is at the core of each human being. When socialisation and cultural influences are peeled away, when relations with mother/father/siblings are removed, what you are left with is the essential humanity, which all humans have in common and which remains constant. This includes an essential femininity and masculinity, which again, is common to all women and men, no matter where they are in the world or in what circumstances.

The task of psychoanalysis is ultimately to strip away the unresolved issues and to find one's true self. This true self is not the asocial core of essentialism, but the self that is constructed on the primitive instincts of the id, when the issues around the Superego are resolved. This is especially complex where women are concerned. Ideas about women and femininity are imbued with Western, white, male and middle-class thought and this is most influential in the thinking around what constitutes selfhood. While Mitchell (1974) considered that psychoanalysis offered a way of analysing gender relations, through Freud's observations of male dominance, it is post-structural feminists who have been providing the tools to critique it more fully.

Psychoanalysis endeavours to provide freedom from unconscious forces — created by the construction of the ego, and manifested in the Superego — but it is constrained by cultural and historical meanings of freedom. Feminist post-structuralist thought has been central in critiquing, firstly, the notions around what constitutes femininity and masculinity and secondly, in disputing perceived universality in humanistic Enlightenment concepts about freedom and emancipation. Equality for women within the existing institutions and discourses may be the goal of liberal feminism, but this position fails to address the circumstances which cause inequality in the first place. This is also the problem of humanism: it assumes that the progressive trend towards freedom and emancipation will be attained by reason and logic. For adult educators, this assumption needs to be scrutinised. Freirean praxis,

a central concept in emancipatory education, has to be underpinned by knowledge. Reflection in a vacuum will not lead to liberation. However, reflexive questioning of the underlying knowledge on which these assumptions are founded can at least ensure that we are aware of the pitfalls.

### Humanistic Psychology and Sociology

Bugental (1967) humorously pointed out that many scientists, including social scientists, are like the small child, who, when asked who was at her party, replied: "There were eleven people. And me." Psychologists could be accused of attempting to create an ideal social world, where people can learn to behave in the appropriate way, guided by the benevolent counsellors, psychologists and group workers.

The task of humanistic psychology and sociology is to insert us as subject into the picture, so that we are part of the process, premised on the philosophy which originated in Hobbes and Locke. It is based on the value of each human, in a context which underpins that value. Humanistic psychology aims to describe what it means to be alive as a human being (Bugental, pp. 5–7). That is, it is a subjective as well as an objective study of humanity. Similarly, according to Berger (1963), humanistic sociology does not regard members of society as merely objective scientific data. The sociologist does not study inanimate objects which reveal themselves to be powerless in the social context. Humanistic sociologists are sensitive to the human significance of what they, as sociologists, are doing (pp. 186–191).

Glassman and Kates (1990) incorporate these features of humanism—inherent valuing of humanity, the subjectivity of the student/member of society — with the fundamental democratic norms that emerge out of the humanistic tradition. The history of humanistic thought is that of the fight against a culturally encoded paradigm — the centrality of the authoritarian, all-powerful deity and the peripherality of the powerless, passive, humanity.

### Humanistic Principles

This section is an exploration of the origins of humanistic group work and an indication of the context in which it developed. It provides an insight into the role it could play in personal development and pointers

to where a social action dimension needs to be developed. The key issues with humanistic group work stem from firstly, groupwork as a process in adult education pedagogy and secondly, the critique centering on humanism and essentialism.

Humanistic group method and process is based on the foundations of humanism and democracy. It is human or person centred, and this in effect means that people are responsible for and to one another. It is fundamentally a philosophical and political positioning, especially in regards to the relationship people have to each other and to power.

In this affirmation of values, humanistic group method may go against prevailing social values and even against prevailing practices in the helping professions (Glassman and Kates, p 17).

The values and norms in humanistic group work have implications not just for the individual involved but also for society at large. There are two objectives in humanistic group processes: the actualisation of each of the participants and the development of group democracy.

In the main, group work is concerned with personal change, and avoids psychosocial issues. However, humanistic group work focuses on the social. According to Glassman and Kates (1990), psychotherapeutic groups work out personal issues through the "transferential reaction", that is, the therapist and group members have other roles transferred to them, in order that the therapeutic process works for the individual. In humanistic group work, therapeutic and educational, 'real life' rather than 'transferential life' is considered more appropriate.

The key consideration is that the group in humanistic group work remains in the here and now, developing on two strands: personal actualisation and social democracy. The values that underpin these strands are outlined below.

- 1 People have inherent worth and capacities.
- 2 People are responsible to and for one another.
- 3 Everyone has the right to belong and to be included.
- 4 Everyone has the right to participate and to be heard.
- 5 Everyone has the right to freedom of speech and of expression.
- 6 Difference is enriching.

- 7 Everyone has the right to freedom of choice and to determine their own destiny.
- 8 People have the right to question and to challenge, particularly those in authority.

(Glassman and Kates, 1990)

The critique of this philosophical positioning stems from its fundamentally liberal background. The liberal mentality is considered flawed in that it relies on the concept of the rational human and how this 'rational man' views fellow human beings. However, the anti-humanistic philosophical position counters this on a number of distinct bases: the first is the essentialist argument, that there is a common nature which all humans have in common, regardless of class, gender, race, ethnicity and so on. The second point is that, in liberal humanism, rationality is perceived as the route to all knowledge; that by thinking logically, truth can be accessed. This perception is culturally bound to Western thought, and by extension, to white, male and probably Christian and theological thought.

### Being and Becoming

Carl Rogers (1980) said

I smile as I think of the various labels I have given to this [person-centred approach] theme during the course of my career — non directive counselling, client centred therapy, student centred teaching, group centred leadership. Because the fields of application have grown in number and variety, the label person centred approach' seems to be the most descriptive (pp. 114–115)

This approach rests on a basic trust in human beings. Rogers considered that there is a tendency in humanity towards a more 'complex and complete development' (p. 118). He asserts that there are two related tendencies in life: the actualising tendency in each person and formative tendency in the universe as a whole.

Taken together, they are the foundation blocks of the person centred approach (p. 118)

Rogers considered that the attitudes and assumptions taken by teachers, leaders, therapists and so on were effective in releasing growthful and constructive changes in personality and behaviour of individuals. Complex and complete development in humans moves from a single cell, to knowing and sensing below the level of consciousness, to a conscious awareness of self and the external world, leading to a 'transcendent awareness of the harmony and unity of the cosmic system, including humankind' (p. 133). He continued:

It seems to me just possible that this hypothesis could be a base upon which we could begin to build a theory for humanistic psychology (p. 133)

The politics of this approach is such that it radically alters the power relationship between the group leader, facilitator or teacher and the group. This approach enables the group members to preserve ownership of her/himself (pp. 13–16)

It has taken me years to recognise that the violent opposition to a client centred therapy sprang not only from its newness [...] but because it struck such an outrageous blow to the therapist's power. It was in its politics that it was most threatening (pp. 15–16).

Rogers' critique of Freudian thought stems from precisely this: Freud perceived that the great majority of people needed authority and that human nature is to be feared and distrusted fundamentally (pp. 16–17).

I have already critiqued the humanistic person-centred approach (Connolly, 1997). I argue that in this patriarchal society, it is very difficult to develop consciousness of the classed and gendered structure inherent in patriarchy. This is particularly so in a liberal tradition which centres so much on the individual and overlooks social and cultural causes of alienation and exclusion. With humanistic group work, people may overcome a personal sense of marginality and change their reaction to it. But the wherewithal to change the external world is more problematic to acquire. When individuals, acting independently, change their personal worlds, systemic and structural issues remain unchallenged. This is the problem that humanism, if it is to be really democratic, needs to address. This is important when groupwork is a central process in adult education pedagogy.

### Groupwork in Adult Education

Humanistic or human relations process causes certain unease, particularly for those engaged in social transformation work. Frequently, human relations education has been used a form of social control: enabling people to participate in their own domestication. However, Freire was clear about the role of dialogue in the pedagogical process and Freirean educators try to establish a learning climate in which this can happen fruitfully. Hope and Timmel (1995) look to the human relations movement in the USA for the group skills to engage in this type of learning climate. They acknowledge the perception that it could be a 'middle-class self-indulgent' process, but re-iterate that it provides the tools for radical transformation.

... within the context of the struggle for transformation, these skills are essential to every movement, to ensure unity, commitment, perseverance, accountability and the effective exercise of authority. (p. 29)

Hollway (1989) cites an example of a humanistic group where a colleague was subjected to a psychologically violent encounter with the facilitator. Hollway concluded that the human relations discourse constructed a meaning of the interaction, which hinged on two factors:

that feelings are at the asocial core of the human being and that the arena of emotions is a neutral space, separated from power relations;

that getting in touch with feelings, alone, and working with them, is the route to change. (p. 138)

Hollway, with some ground, sees human relations psychology proposed as a binary opposite to the rational individual of positivist psychology (pp. 26-7) However, she points out that the outcome of a humanistic intervention is to enable the rational individual to emerge, rather than to replace it with the emotional, asocial individual. That is, the essential core of the individual could be brought out and would be the source of change. She asserts that this then would be the seat of social change: the sum of individual change. And, congruent with the critique of liberalism, this would preserve, albeit with all sincerity, the status quo.

Hollway sees the true dualism as individual change versus structural change: say, humanistic psychology versus orthodox Marxism (p. 27) and contends that post-structuralism can transcend this hopeless binary opposite, requiring a theory of the subject which is not caught up in the parallel dualism of individual and society.

Green (1995) identifies four strands to the critique of humanism. Firstly, the Marxist critique which posits that there is no pre-social human nature. There is no human subject which exists outside of cultural and historical contexts,

no timeless, unchanging essence of humanity (p. 14)

Human subjects have natures that are rooted in biology, but are also the result of historical processes of material development and class conflict. In addition, they may be said to have the capacity to construct the self, through various complex interactions: with culture, environment and history: a tension between constructionism and agency.

Green's look at the second strand of the critique of humanistic thought is focused on the critique of representationalism and its concept of truth, led by Saussure. There are no properties or essences independent of our means of representing the world. If each language imposes its own way of dividing up the world, truth cannot consist in so-called accurate representation of the existing structure of reality, but only of what is thought to be acceptable in this scheme. Our conception of ourselves is constructed within language, therefore it is determined by language.

The subject is not the unitary, transparently knowable, rational consciousness of the Cartesian tradition, but irrevocably split, constructed through imaginary identification with an image, first in the mirror, later in the Other of language (p. 16)

Green asserts that, because language circumscribes truth, in this perspective, there can be no language-independent truth. All that is possible, she considers, is that which Foucault (1987, p. 6) calls 'games of truth' which are replaced by others along the same lines. She proposes that Foucault's work is not a complete break with humanism. While 'man (sic) is an invention of recent date...' (Foucault, 1970, p. 387),



he expresses his commitment to a general ethos, associated with the Enlightenment's ideology of liberal humanism, that what we humans are is an analysis of the limits which are imposed on us and the possibility of going beyond those limits (Foucault, 1984, p. 50). However, the rejection of humanism is linked with the rejection of the Enlightenment as a 'metanarrative of legitimation' in Lyotard's (1987) words. The grand, universal theories of humankind, while they may be laudable from certain perspectives especially in the desire to bring about emancipation from economic want and social and political oppression, do not serve the interests of everyone affected and may be as oppressive as what they aim to displace.

The third strand revolves on the question: is there a single human nature? Humanists would probably say 'yes' to this while many feminists would rightly pose the next question: what is meant by human nature ... does it take the male as the norm and the female as the Other? This feminist position is characterised by the recognition of difference — that gendered identities are socially constructed; the female in relation to the male. Humanists are, in this frame, adopting a conception of human nature as implicitly masculine. The liberal tradition — for example, Harriet Taylor, John Stuart Mill, and so on — has endeavoured from time to time to work with a concept of humanity, which is less obviously male.

The final strand of the critiques of humanism according to Green derives from Derrida and his tactical use of structuralism, which he takes beyond itself. Derrida's position is, firstly, that what he terms 'logocentrism' encompasses the myth of Western metaphysics, that the meaning of a word can be fully present in the rational mind. Secondly, the concept 'différance' — a combination of difference and deferral demonstrates that language is indeterminate and meaning is always — undecidable and endlessly deferred. 'Difference' can be used as an interchangeable term for deconstruction and may offer us a conception of our humanity which makes it an on-going product of its own self-representation. Identity can be understood, not as an ahistorical essence, but in the traces we have left in history.

Feminist critiques of these concepts pivot on the following. If language is a social construction, then it is men who have constructed it, because women have been the dominated class. Thus, the world is a

man's world. Irigaray maintains that 'phallogentrism' maps the morphology of the male body within language and determines the construction of the subject. Feminism has become identified with the rejection of humanism, which is characterised as phallogentric, especially in the pursuit of objectivity and truth.

The concept of 'différance' is adopted in the form of the usual idea of difference, by some feminists, to express on the one hand, the difference between the genders, underpinned by the aspiration towards equality and on the other, the value or superiority of the female. In addition, differences between categories of women, needs, situations and so on, have to be taken into account in the desire for equality. Irigaray maintains that it is possible for women to articulate our own subjectivities through our construction of genealogies, and our own place in history. Through this, it may be possible to suggest alternatives to the male subject, and to the masculine conceptions of reason, logic and the good.

Feminist thought is perceived in opposition to humanist thought, albeit relying implicitly on a humanistic view of the subject. However, Green's four-strand critique of humanism shows that it is possible to use the useful parts of humanist ideas in a feminist way and to reject notions that are clearly untenable. Indeed, in the case of the post-structuralist deconstructionism, with its emphasis on difference and the creation of new knowledge, the concepts at the heart of humanism acquire a new significance. In the construction of new identities, we can build on the traces of what we want for ourselves. This means taking from history the ideas of justice and morality which we wish to include in our epistemology. It also means that the notion of creative agency is embedded in our subjectivities.

### **Feminist Group Work**

Butler and Wintram (1991) show that group work is value laden. Groupwork is a dynamic process which takes place within a social entity and it is possible for it to create a just and equal society, if it is underpinned with the values of justice and equality. The aspiration of social psychology is to influence society, but there is no doubt that it originated in the liberal, Western 'malestream', which, while it may have been responsible for bringing about deep change in the past,

certainly contains within it now, the blocks to further change. Liberal humanism is a force against change, at this stage.

However, to reject humanism is to risk rejecting values which might not otherwise have a home. The critique of essentialism is vital, but the move towards equality has to begin from a position that embodies a set of values.

Liberation only occurs when women create their own value system and world views to counteract social injustice (Butler and Wintram, 1991, p. 13)

The explicit expression of values ensures that they can be scrutinised and analysed. I choose to have humanistic values, not because of an essential commonality that we share, rather I believe in the struggle towards justice and equality and that we are worthy of respect and value. Radical humanism has the tools to overcome the blocks to equality (Ryan, 1997). Critical analysis is central to resisting and destabilizing the social roles that are imposed upon us, and to the movement toward collective action.

Group work can enable women to develop consciousness and awareness, necessary to take control over our own lives. It can, if it is clearly underpinned by a radical agenda, provide the tools to resist the 'business as usual' track, that the dominant groups maintain. In this way, group work can advance women's struggle for equality.

### Conclusion

The implications of this positioning are, firstly, that critical reflection is necessary if adult education is to maintain its focus on the wider, social picture. Adult education could become merely a tool for the economic system — for training workers, for supplying personally developing adults into the labour market — when it has the potential to be a site for engaging in critical debates about the nature of Irish society and what types of futures we want. If we want to restructure Irish society in order to bring about equality and justice, then lifelong learning can be the location of the crucial ideological debates. It is not enough to rely on individuals making it through the system. Collectively, people need to create a vision and work progressively towards

it. This is all the more important for women: women have made adult education the channel for the women's movement. It would be devastating if it were to become a route to conformity and domestication.

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6

**'IT'S ALL CHANGED FROM HERE':  
WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF  
COMMUNITY EDUCATION**

**Elizabeth Kiely, Máire Leane and Rosie Meade**

**Introduction**

This chapter documents some experiences of working-class women who participate in adult literacy and basic education programmes, on the north side of Cork city. It is widely recognised that gender and class oppressions are reinforced by the formal education sector. This research provides some insight into the positive and negative potential of education and shows that the informal education setting creates a more supportive learning environment for women who have experienced gender and class oppressions. By documenting the rewards of women's participation in community based education programmes, this research affirms and seeks to raise the profile of this developing sector in Irish education.

The work has three main objectives: (a) to undertake a comparative analysis of the women's experiences of formal and informal educational settings, with particular reference to the way in which their experiences were mediated by social class and gender, (b) to identify and critically evaluate the type and extent of any change that occurred as a result of the women's involvement in the informal education sector and (c) to highlight the contribution which small-scale qualitative evaluations can make to the refinement of theory and practice.

**Approach**

Socialist feminist epistemology and humanist theory provide the theoretical framework guiding this study. The socialist feminist approach