Alliance Between Women:
Psychological Processes Against Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Heterosexism

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Abstract

A project was organized in the Netherlands to study and interrupt the psychological factors that divide women from one another. Black and white, Jewish and non-Jewish, and lesbian and heterosexual women met in parallel groups for several five month cycles. Groups focused first on self-disclosure (visibility and pride), then on within-group dynamics (solidarity), and then on between-group dynamics (alliance).

The black-white process was characterized by anger and blame on the black side and by guilt and fear of revenge or need for reassurance on the white side. The Jewish-non-Jewish process was characterized by feelings of isolation and needs for protection on the Jewish side and by feelings of banality and needs for seeking specialness by association on the non-Jewish side. The lesbian-heterosexual process was characterized by feelings of defiance and needs to exclude on the lesbian side and by feelings of confusion and needs for seeking self-definition through others on the heterosexual side. Participants moved in a direction of greater demands for change, contact with others, self-definition, self-assertion, and choice.

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A project was developed in the Netherlands[1] in order to study and interrupt the psychological factors that divide women from one another. This report briefly describes the organizational and conceptual framework of the project and offers an analysis of three group processes.

Organizational Framework

Parallel groups were formed to address issues of racism, anti-semitism, and heterosexism between women[2]. Each group was specifically set up with a majority of the oppressed group, i.e. one group had seven black[3] and five white women, one had seven Jewish and five non-Jewish women, and one had seven lesbian and five heterosexual women. Two women, one from each sub-group, acted as facilitators. Class differences between women were addressed within each group and also in a full-day workshop every few months in which all groups met together. The balance between oppressed and dominant categories of participants was considered important to counteract the assumption of normalcy which white, non-Jewish, and heterosexual women are likely to have internalized and to counteract the self-concealment and isolation which black, Jewish, and lesbian women are likely to have internalized. An attempt was also made to balance the participants across dimensions other than the one upon which the group was focused, such as class, age, motherhood, or

nationality. That would not only strengthen lines of solidarity, but also avoid distortions such as perceiving all heterosexual women as mothers and all lesbians as non-mothers, or all white women as middle-class and all black women as working-class.

The groups were organized within one project in order to facilitate an awareness of the interactions between issues and, hopefully, to encourage a spilling of wisdom from one group to another. Each group met every two weeks for five months at which time new groups were formed. During the group meetings, which lasted three hours, sub-groups of women with common political identities met separately for various lengths of time.

Conceptual Framework

The following concepts were used throughout the course of the groups for purposes of analysis and structure:

Internalized oppression[4] is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society. Internalized oppression is likely to consist of self-hatred, self-concealment, and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, fear of violence, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive. Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups.

Internalized domination is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others. Internalized domination is likely to consist of feelings of superiority, normalcy, and self-righteousness together with denial of reality, guilt, fear, projection, and alienation from one's body and from nature. Internalized domination perpetuates oppression of others and alienation from oneself by either denying or degrading all but a narrow range of human possibilities. One's own humanity is thus internally

restricted and one's qualities of empathy, trust, love, and openness to others and to meaningful, i.e. life enhancing, work become frozen and unavailable.

Visibility is being oneself - fully, openly, non-defensively, expressively. Visibility of the oppressed group contradicts self-concealment, isolation, subservience, and dominant denial or avoidance of oppressed persons. Visibility of the dominant group contradicts guilt, fear of exposure, projection, alienation from one's body, and detachment from others.

Pride is self-acceptance, self-appreciation, and self-respect, in particular respect for one's identity, one's heritage, and one's birthright to self-determination. Pride carries with it an automatic indignation against the abuse of any human being, including oneself, and a vast resource for perseverance and rightous struggle. Most fundamentally, pride derives from deep love for oneself and for life. Pride contradicts both internalized oppression and internalized domination.

Solidarity is knowledge of, respect for, and unity with persons whose identities are in certain essential ways common with one's own. Constructive solidarity with other like persons requires pride in oneself. One cannot respect in the other what one denies in oneself. Internalized oppression isolates people from one another, especially from others like themselves, and thereby prevents solidarity. Internalized domination binds people together on the basis of their power to dominate others rather than on the basis of their respect for one another. Solidarity is essential to oppressed groups for liberation and to dominant groups for collective alliance.

Alliance is knowledge of, respect for, and commitment to persons whose identities are in certain essential ways different from one's own but whose interests are in certain essential ways akin. Alliance for dominant groups could be defined as a process of humanization, i.e. sharing power and resourses with others in society in order to create structures equally responsive to

the needs and interests of all people. This process requires giving up one's drive to superiority, giving up one's prejudices against others, and embracing a more flexible relation to oneself, to others, and to society as a whole. Alliance for oppressed groups could be defined as a readiness to struggle with dominant groups for one's right to an equal share of power and resources. This readiness necessitates recognition of and indignation against oppression together with the collective confidence and strength to bring about change. Furthermore, readiness necessitates recognition and acceptance of, never gratefulness for, true alliance. Humanization and the readiness to struggle are suppressed by internalized domination and internalized oppression. Pride and solidarity within both groups prepare them for becoming partners in alliance against oppression.

The breakdown of internalized oppression and internalized domination within individuals is seen as a necessary psychological condition for building effective alliances. Visibility, pride, and solidarity as defined above provide conceptual and structural guidelines for that process. This report will not detail the specific methods used within the groups[5] because those specifics are less critical than the general process toward self-disclosure, self-esteem, and identification with others.

It is important to note that internalized oppression and internalized domination interact not only between different persons but also intrapsychically within one person. We have all experienced both oppression and domination and have thereby all internalized both patterns in a mutually accommodating web of insecurities and rigidities. Although the political consequences of oppression are opposite to those of domination, i.e. powerlessness versus power, the psychological consequences are surprisingly alike. The fear of violence that we incorporate as victims of oppression reinforces the fear of losing control or the fear of revenge that we incorporate as agents of oppression. The isolation that we incorporate with feelings of inferiority reinforces the isolation that we incorporate with feelings of superiority. The guilt for

dominating over others likewise reinforces the guilt for our own oppression which we incorporate as a defense against feeling no control over our fate or as an incorporation of dominant projections. Internalized oppression and internalized domination reinforce one another. In the fight to maintain superiority, we sabotage ourselves by maintaining inferiority as well. Since superior status is often tenuously balanced upon denying inferior status, we must continuously exert energy to suppress and conceal that part of our identity which is socially powerless: "I can make it as a professional if they just never discover that I'm a lesbian" or "As a white person I can become a member of any club, if I don't let on that I'm Jewish" or "I can't hide being a woman but I can pretend to be one of the boys...". The method, and the cost, of domination is collusion with our own oppression. We become more and more rigid as dominators because in fact we are striving not only to oppress others but also to deny a part of ourselves. Those oppressed groups outside our own which trigger the strongest emotions and behaviors of domination are likely to challenge the most rigid denials within us. The more restricted an adult is in her own spontaneity, the more restrictive she will probably be with children; the more dependent a heterosexual woman is upon male approval, the more threatened she will probably be by lesbian autonomy; the more insecure someone is about her own body, the more uneasy she will probably be with a physically different woman. Every human difference we meet is a confrontation with ourselves.

The concepts defined above will not be used by name in the following group analysis so that the immediacy of interactions can be preserved as closely as possible. However, all participants read a proposal including this conceptual framework before the onset of their group and they agreed upon the basic approach from self-examination to within-group examination to alliance across differences. During the meetings, reference to conceptual definitions was often made in order to illuminate the common or complementary political origin of psychological conflicts.

ANALYSIS OF GROUPS

As one might have expected, the groups themselves were (and continue to be) confronting, confusing, and demanding. Obviously, every participant experienced the alliance process in a uniquely personal way; the observations and analysis offered here are certainly not intended to discount individual processes with gross generalizations. However, those individual processes are best described and interpreted by the individuals themselves. My purpose is to examine our experiences within the framework which brought us together, namely within the framework of group identity according to political status in society.

Certain trends developed in each group which are both overlapping and distinct. One could describe each process as a move from defensiveness to assertion. Within each oppressed and dominant group this movement was characterized by specific feelings which can be explained within the context of the specific oppression (i.e. racism, anti-semitism, and heterosexism). The following discussions are focused upon the movement and the internalized resistance to change; they are not intended to provide a literal transcription of each group process. After each analysis, a chart will be drawn which summarizes the movement within several groups focused upon the same issue.

A Common Resistance

It became painfully clear that past experiences with oppression and domination distorted our perceptions of the present and hindered our ability to identify with people in common political situations. Resistance to owning our present situation and to identifying with people who have different pasts was felt within every group. On the oppressed side, Jewish women who had experienced the Nazi war trauma sometimes had difficulty identifying with those who had not; black women who were born in the Netherlands sometimes had difficulty identifying with those who were born in a (so-called) third world

country; lesbian women who had 'always' been lesbian sometimes had difficulty identifying with those who had formerly been married heterosexuals. Those who had experienced the oppression most acutely in the past were likely to feel like the true oppressed group, for example, the real lesbians or the real Jews... "You're just a nouveau lesbian" or "What do you American Jews know about being Jewish?!" In other words, "You haven't suffered enough". On the other side, those who shared the same political identity in the present but had not experienced the oppression so personally in thepast were likely to reject the oppressed status for themselves: "I don't want to be one of THEM." "My lesbianism is only political - sexually I'm heterosexual" or "My mother is Jewish - not me!" or "I've never felt black." The dynamics were admittedly not simple. Sometimes it was exactly the person who had suffered the most who rejected the identity the strongest and sometimes it was exactly the one who had suffered the least who embraced the identity with the least ambivalence.

Also the dominant group typically differentiated themselves from one another on the basis of differing past experiences: "I'm not Jewish, but I've never been Christian either." "I'm white, but I grew up with black people." "I'm heterosexual, but I make love with women too." Whether in an effort to relieve guilt or to avoid exclusion, the differentiation was a denial of our present time position. Being in a group with women whose present position clearly differed from one's own challenged the denials we had each internalized. We came to realize that past experiences, although they deeply affected our perceptions and feelings, did not define our political positions.

Black-White Alliance

The feelings which most clearly emerged in the group of black and white women were anger on the black side and guilt on the white side. Those feelings are logical given that institutionalized racism systematically puts whites in positions of invalidating and subjugating blacks who are systematically forced to accept such treatment in order to survive. We noticed in our group, however, that despite the logic of our feelings, they were not useful tools for building alliance among women. At times the anger seemed to freeze into powerless judgment and the guilt seemed to freeze into fear of revenge or need for reassurance (from blacks). Not only can judgment, fear, or neediness sabotage change, but it can also intensify antagonism. Nonetheless, such feelings are natural responses to racism which may need to be expressed in order to transform the inertia of emotional pain into demands for change.

Feelings of guilt were present for some of the white women from the very beginning of the group. I'll start with that white dynamic because, as I analyze it, black anger was triggered by the constant white undercurrent of guilt. On the first day, in a sub-group, one white women said, "I just sit there with the black women and feel nervous and guilty and don't know what to do"[6]. Later in the process, when a few black women expressed mistrust toward an initiative of a white women, that woman asked repeatedly, "Why can't you trust me? I know I have integrity." Both the nervous preoccupation with guilt of the first woman and the bewildered preoccupation with innocence of the second woman reflected the basic confrontation racism poses to all whites. Some fall into guilt and a corresponding fear of revenge; others fall into a need to be exempt from guilt and a corresponding need for reassurance. Both patterns evolved in our group and both outraged the black women. White dependency on either black kindness (to sooth white fear) or black reassurance (to feign white innocence) inadvertently leaned the group more toward white

concerns than toward the struggle against racism that had brought us together. Paradoxically, we white women had to learn that our bending over the backs of black women to prove (through their approval) that we were good allies was more a burden than a support and that our task was to stand autonomously and wisely on our own resources to dismantle domination for our own good.

The black women began with commitment, good-will, and self-protective skepticism. During the first few meetings, they differed among themselves about whether and how much to meet in their separate sub-group. Only after the first black-white clash and expression of emotions did the need to meet separately become unanimous among them. And, as they felt greater solidarity, their reactions and demands in the mixed group became bolder and more confronting. One black woman said, "This group is getting scary and uncomfortable for you white women. That's the way the world outside is for us." And another, "You white women wouldn't be working on racism at all if we weren't here. If we'd never come to Holland you wouldn't work on it and if we weren't with you in a group you wouldn't be working on it!"

Whereas guilt paralyzes, anger energizes. However, the first phases of releasing anger are often explaining (which if nothing changes leads to resentment) or blaming (which when nothing changes pushes people away) or destroying (which violates one's own environment). As expressions of defensive resistance, explaining, blaming, and destroying can eventually breed bitterness. The challenge for the black women was to move from spilling energy in self-defense towards sustaining energy in demands for change.

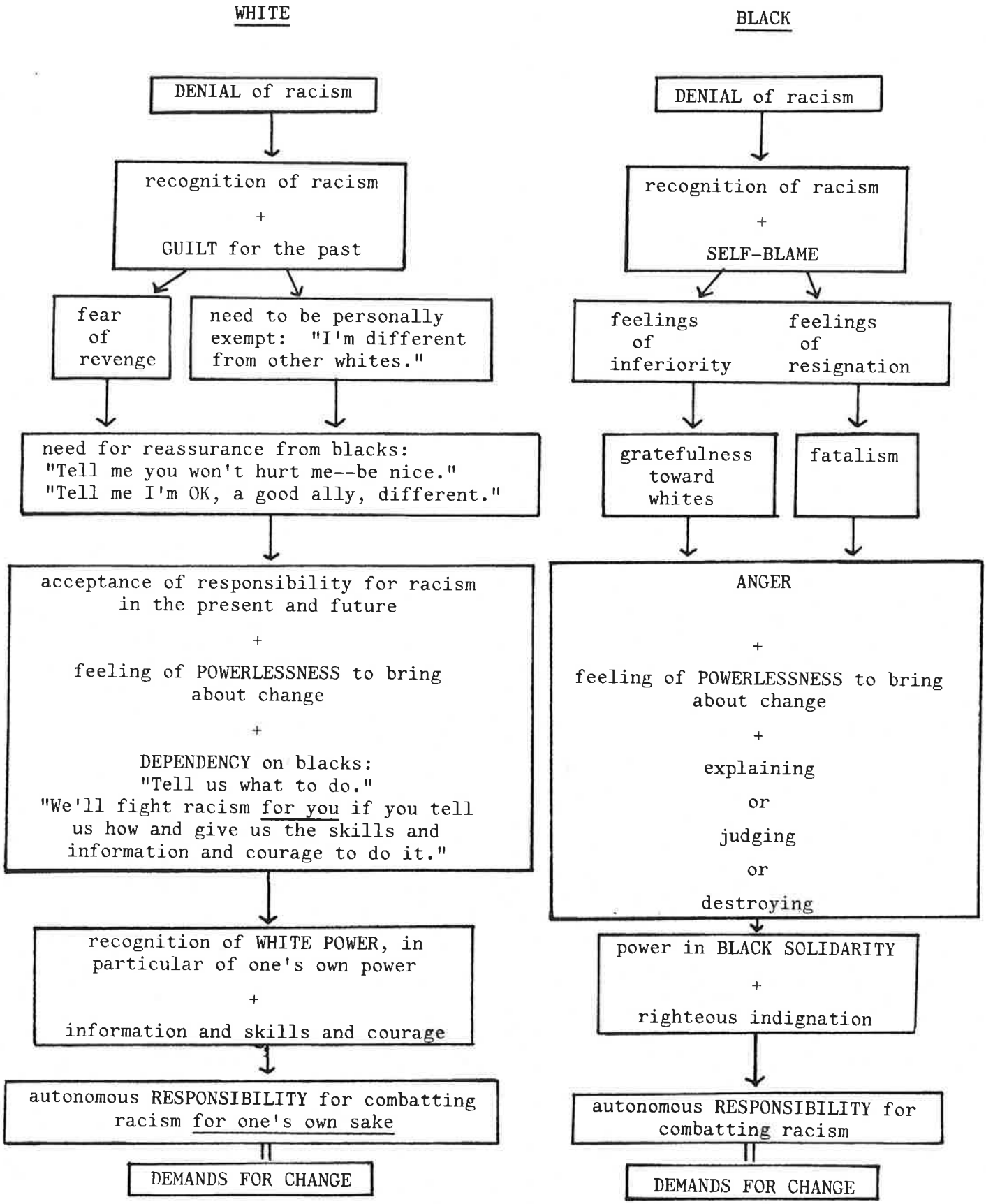
As the group proceeded, the black women realized more and more the importance of meeting in a separate sub-group. They began to feel stronger together, more solidarity with one another, more expressive of their ethnic cultural differences and more committed to their racial political commonalities. They became less interested in our white insecurities, more demanding that

we forge our struggle independently, and at the same time more aware of being the experts on racism. White dependency shifted from an emotional need for reassurance to an acknowledgement of the unawareness racism fosters in all whites. We began to validate the awareness we could gain from one another, as opposed to our initial discount of each other and reliance on the black women, in an attempt to become less dependent upon blacks for racial awareness.

As the white women became more aware of racism and of their power to combat it and as the black women began to validate their demands for change, we became more prepared to function in alliance without reassurance and without judgment. What we both want is to make our lives better by ending racism. Although our group process was often confused and clumsy, we all did begin making deeper and clearer commitments in our lives outside of the group. As one woman said, "It's heavy...but something's really happening." What happened? Well, the three white women in teaching positions changed their jobs significantly to include an emphasis on anti-racism work. Another white woman realized through her participation in the group how debilitating guilt was in all aspects of her life; she decided to go into individual therapy and to return to the alliance project at a later time. A group of whites against racism was organized at a social work school. Several of the black women expanded their support networks with new initiatives specific to their needs: A black lesbian group was started and a few women joined a black women's counseling class. A black woman and a white woman from the group organized seminars on racism and experimental studies of change processes among black and white participants.[7] Another black woman planned to organize a new alliance group like the original one after a six month period in her black lesbian group. The tendency to work more in separate groups grew out of a need for greater solidarity within groups as well as from exhaustion and confusion around, as I analyse it, the clash of guilt and

anger. Everyone in the group agreed that although our process was difficult, our lives changed significantly. For some women it was unclear whether the changes resulted from this group or from other simultaneous activities in their lives; some felt that the changes didn't occur primarily in the group but definitely because the group was there. One woman said during our last meeting: "Through this group I've begun to take myself more seriously as a black woman. In the past, if someone said something racist, I would have thought, well, he thinks that, I couldn't care less what he thinks....but now I've become more honest because truthfully it does matter to me what he thinks, it matters a lot."

The above process describes one experience of the general movement from denial of racism to demands for change. The following chart represents an attempt to sketch recurring dynamics experienced in several black-white alliance groups. What is drawn here in linear form is actually a back and forth process of uncovering deeper levels of denials as we move toward more assertive demands for change.


WHITE
DENIAL of racism
recognition of racism
+
GUILT for the past
fear of revenge
need to be personally exempt: "I'm different from other whites."
need for reassurance from blacks:
"Tell me you won't hurt me--be nice."
"Tell me I'm OK, a good ally, different."
acceptance of responsibility for racism in the present and future
+
feeling of POWERLESSNESS to bring about change
+
DEPENDENCY on blacks:
"Tell us what to do."
"We'll fight racism for you if you tell us how and give us the skills and information and courage to do it."
recognition of WHITE POWER, in particular of one's own power
+
information and skills and courage
autonomous RESPONSIBILITY for combatting racism for one's own sake
DEMANDS FOR CHANGE
BLACK
DENIAL of racism
recognition of racism
+
SELF-BLAME
feelings of inferiority
feelings of resignation
gratefulness toward whites
fatalism
ANGER
+
feeling of POWERLESSNESS to bring about change
+
explaining
or
judging
or
destroying
power in BLACK SOLIDARITY
+
righteous indignation
autonomous RESPONSIBILITY for combatting racism
DEMANDS FOR CHANGE

Jewish-Non-Jewish Alliance

A feeling of isolation among the Jewish women and a feeling of banality among the non-Jewish women created an underlying dynamic of struggle for identity. Reflecting upon the nature of anti-semitism, those feelings fall into context. Isolation has been both an effect and a resistance to anti-semitism; a logical reaction to being singled out as a scapegoat and persecuted is to secure oneself either among others like oneself who one can trust, i.e. Jews, or to merge, that is assimilate, with the dominant mass, i.e. non-Jews. In joining a group as a Jew with non-Jews, one is forced to contront both one's Jewish group isolation and one's individual isolation as a Jew amongst non-Jews. In both cases, the isolation is defensive and as such is sealed in caution, fear, and a constant sense of urgency. On the other side, in joining a group as a non-Jew, one is forced to confront the singularity of the Jewish experience and identity, and the deadening effects of dominant conformity on one's own identity. A feeling of being banal or commonplace oneself is bound to follow.

At one meeting, when discussing the essence of being Jewish, a Jewish woman and a non-Jewish woman began a critical tug of war between the cost of being special versus being ordinary. The Jewish woman had been saying that the essence of being Jewish was being special. She was expressing both her pride and her isolation. The non-Jewish woman suddenly said, "...geez, I wish I was special. Nobody ever told me that I was special." To which the Jewish woman replied, "I wish I was ordinary." And the non-Jewish woman: "I've always been ordinary. I want to be special." At another meeting, in sub-groups, the non-Jews talked about their own specialness and the Jews talked about the isolation they experienced in their 'special' position as Jews. Some Jews felt the specialness as a source of strength, others as a source of oppression; for most it was both and we needed the strength to deal with the (fear of) oppression. By

focusing upon their own specialness, the non-Jews were trying to respond to a question they often felt nagging within themselves in their contact with Jewish women: "What about me?" One non-Jewish woman expressed this as follows to a Jewish woman: "I feel like I have no identity when I am with you. I don't know who I am. It would be easier if I were Jewish." The Jewish woman answered that it wouldn't be easier for her if the other was also Jewish, but that she did need for the other to know who she was. Furthermore, she admitted that she sometimes found it easier, in the sense of safer, to be with non-Jews. Deep inside she heard a little voice that said, "They'd be able to protect me if..."

Out of their defensive isolation, Jews may be inclined to gravitate toward relationships which promise protection; they may also be likely to invest their work with the earnestness of a struggle for survival. Non-Jews in close relationships with Jews, out of their own fear, may accommodate the anxiety which Jews have internalized by acting protectively. One non-Jewish woman told in the group how she had hidden a newspaper article reporting anti-semitic incidents from her Jewish lover; the Jewish women jumped immediately in protest. Such protectiveness, although Jews may awarely or unawarely seek it, is basically an accommodation of Jewish powerlessness and an obstruction to alliance between Jews and non-Jews. Hiding anti-semitism from Jews is as misguided and collusive a strategy as leaving it for them to combat alone.

If Jews sometimes gravitate toward non-Jews for protection, non-Jews sometimes gravitate toward Jews to become special by association. As one non-Jewish woman said, "I've met active, struggling women in this group and that inspires me to be like that too!" And, "As a child I had always identified with Jewish history." Another woman said, "I find most of the Jewish women in my life difficult but I do like their force and intelligence." The ambivalence of admiring qualities they associated with Jews and at the same time feeling uncomfortable with them was expressed by the non-Jews more than once:

"It turned out to be the wrong group for me", said one woman, "I should have joined the black or the lesbian group." And, "I can get along fine with the working class Jewish women; it's the upper class women I can't stand." Differences in class backgrounds caused a critical clash in the group. Despite our awareness of anti-semitic scapegoating mechanisms, the tendency to point the finger at the Jews with higher class backgrounds was present among both Jews and non-Jews. Often lines of solidarity were drawn more on the basis of class background than on the basis of being Jewish or not. The Jewish women of working class background were all also of politically active socialist backgrounds: "If it hadn't been for our political tie to the resistance, we never would have made it. Most working class Jews didn't..." Even within our small group we saw the historical dynamic of Jews pitted against one another in their quest for safety; those whose backgrounds associated them most closely with the Gentile white dominant society were then seen by everyone, Jews and non-Jews, as the oppressors.

One non-Jewish woman said, "Eight Jewish women is just too many. It's taken me all this time just to get close to one!" Her feeling reflected a situation between Jews and non-Jews which may be specific to post World War II Europe, and to other places where there are relatively few Jews. For the non-Jews (and some of the Jews) under 35 years of age, the group afforded a first opportunity to be with 'so many' Jewish people. For the Jews (and non-Jews) over 35 years of age, the group was seen at the beginning primarily as a place to 'work on the war'. The main association with Jewishness for them was Hitler. One Jewish woman said on the first evening, "I am not here to become more Jewish. I just want to work through my pain around Jewish history." In the course of the group, she said that the load of the war had become less heavy and she was able to reclaim also nice parts of being Jewish. She was no longer ashamed to tell people that she sat in a group with Jews and she began to talk with her children about being Jewish.

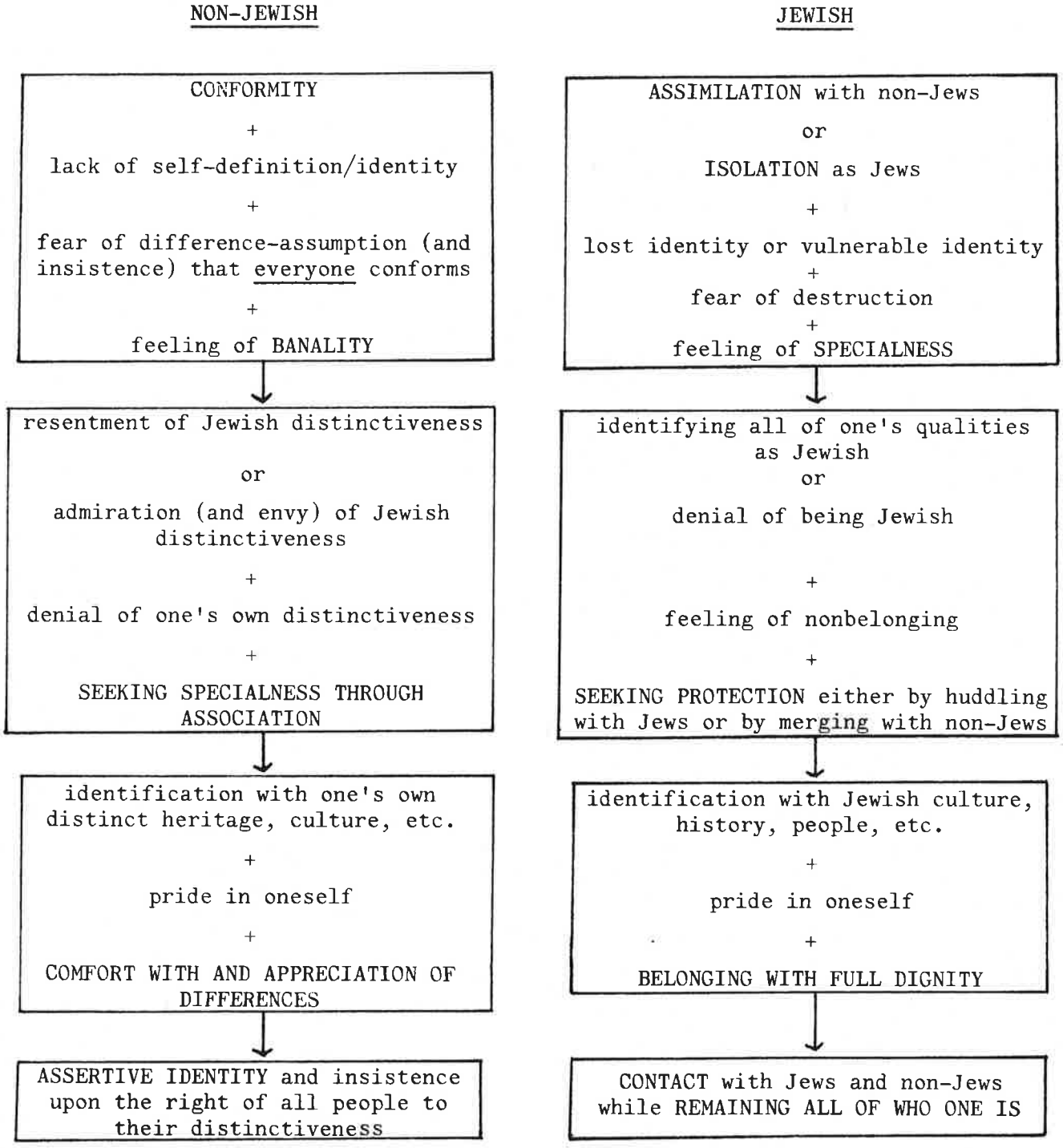
The move from isolation toward contact was shared by all the Jewish women. One woman said, "This group has been an exercise ground for how I can talk with non-Jews...it's safer here than in other places. Lots has changed for me." Another Jewish woman said, "I feel prouder about my Jewish identity now so I can come out more as who I am everywhere." Another woman said, "I've decided to go after the people I want in my life." Everyone began talking more about their Jewishness in their private and work relationships. For the women who had formerly done this almost exclusively with other Jews, the contact with non-Jews was important as a breakthrough of their isolation. For the women who had never talked with other Jews, that contact was important.

The non-Jews experienced a move from inconspicuousness toward self-definition. One evening all of the non-Jews agreed that working toward alliance with Jews got them in touch with their most chronic feelings of insecurity: "I have to work on myself to be a good ally. I'm here for me." Another woman said, "I used to think it was complementary to say how intelligent Jews are. Now I realize that it was a prejudice fed on my feeling dull. To be an ally I have to know that I'm smart too!" In the course of the group, the non-Jews moved toward greater acceptance of their own religious backgrounds, prouder identification with their own culture, and a clearer definition and expression of their personal and political commitments. One woman wrote, "I'm so far that I can say that I've begun to understand how my own isolation works and I realize how important it is to define myself and to find recognition and identity." And further, "One thing has become clear to me for life: my commitment against anti-semitism, I stand for that , you can count on it."

The group was often chaotic, sometimes aggressive, and usually warm and loud and confusing. Most everyone agreed that it was a rather awful exhilarating experience which changed her life. Nearly everyone began to

read a lot about Jews and everyone took risks to initiate or deepen a friendship. The group was a confrontation which changed our personal and work lives. Jewish and non-Jewish processes are interlocking. Contact requires a solid identity at both sides. Jews do not need to give up or hide their identity and non-Jews don't need to melt into the code of dominant conformity. In fact, self-assertion from either encourages self-assertion from the other.

The following chart represents recurring dynamics in several Jewish-non-Jewish alliance groups.


NON-JEWISH
CONFORMITY
+
lack of self-definition/identity
+
fear of difference-assumption (and insistence) that everyone conforms
+
feeling of BANALITY
resentment of Jewish distinctiveness
or
admiration (and envy) of Jewish distinctiveness
+
denial of one's own distinctiveness
+
SEEKING SPECIALNESS THROUGH ASSOCIATION
identification with one's own distinct heritage, culture, etc.
+
pride in oneself
+
COMFORT WITH AND APPRECIATION OF DIFFERENCES
ASSERTIVE IDENTITY and insistence upon the right of all people to their distinctiveness
JEWISH
ASSIMILATION with non-Jews
or
ISOLATION as Jews
+
lost identity or vulnerable identity
+
fear of destruction
+
feeling of SPECIALNESS
identifying all of one's qualities as Jewish
or
denial of being Jewish
+
feeling of nonbelonging
+
SEEKING PROTECTION either by huddling with Jews or by merging with non-Jews
identification with Jewish culture, history, people, etc.
+
pride in oneself
+
BELONGING WITH FULL DIGNITY
CONTACT with Jews and non-Jews while REMAINING ALL OF WHO ONE IS

Lesbian-Heterosexual Alliance

For the lesbian women, the alliance process was characterized by a path between defiance and self-assertion. For the heterosexual women the path ran from confusion to choice. The heading for this section would not satisfy the heterosexual women, or at least it would not have satisfied them at the onset of the group. They were not comfortable with being classified as heterosexuals, although most of them were in heterosexual relationships and all of them derived the privileges associated with that status. The lesbians snickered at the heterosexual discomfort. If we examine the nature of heterosexism, then snickering falls logically into place as a reflection of lesbian defiance and discomfort falls into place as a reflection of heterosexual confusion. Heterosexism, the assumption that all people are, would like to be, or should be heterosexual, prevents the possibility of choice to all people and oppresses those who stray from the heterosexual norm. For the deviants, i.e. lesbians, holding onto one's forbidden preference is a defiance of the culture. For the conformers, i.e. heterosexuals, confrontation with the non-conformers is a confrontation with one's own lack of choice, a process which pressures one into a choice either for the life one already leads...or not.

During the first week, everyone wrote a paragraph telling what it meant to her to be a lesbian or a heterosexual or whatever. One lesbian wrote, "I often feel illegal...The feeling of being different is very fundamental, it sits real deep. It also means being excluded." Another woman wrote, "I don't feel like always having to explain...so I don't bother much with men." And another, "I should live as a black lesbian woman, but then I wouldn't be lesbian anymore, or only in silence, and that choice I don't want, I DON'T WANT!" And another, "Oi vey, what a shunde (Yiddish for 'shame'), a Jewish girl, a lesbian?!" Like every group this group was filled with multiple interlocking identities and oppressions.

A bisexual woman who joined the group as a heterosexual because she benefits from heterosexual privileges as a married woman wrote, "I'm in the clouds with my love for women. First feeling out of my element, especially in public, now feeling it almost as a challenge...". A heterosexual woman wrote, "I don't literally make love with a woman now, sometimes I do with a man, but I protest being called heterosexual. I feel room to move...where I can call myself bisexual." And another, "I seldom tell anyone other than feminist friends that I sometimes make love also with women. I realize the social ease I get from a heterosexual relationship and where I use that."

From the beginning, we were confronted with the choices and nonchoices which were determining our lives. In the second meeting, the sub-group of lesbians bumped unexpectedly into the contrasting meanings lesbianism held in terms of motherhood. One woman said how pleased she was that she had become a lesbian before she "made the whole mistake of motherhood and marriage." Another agreed that she was glad not to have children. A third lesbian woman sat silently for a moment and then began to tell how angry she always felt when she heard lesbians belittle motherhood and how proud she was to be the mother of seven children. Another woman then explained the importance in her life of mothering her lover's two sons. It was finally agreed that what was most important was being able to choose.

When the lesbian and heterosexual sub-groups joined one another, everyone talked about how central an issue motherhood is to the solidarity of all women. The dominant assumption is that all lesbian women are not mothers, and that all heterosexuals <u>are</u>, or would like to be, unless there's something wrong with them...like being lesbians. Those assumptions, like the assumption of heterosexuality, deny choice to women. In fact, whether we decide to bear children or not, all women must face ourselves as mothers and must decide how, whom, and what to nurture in our lives; likewise, we must all

face ourselves as people apart from those we nurture, as people who are entitled to our own future and our own satisfactions. We are oppressed both by assumptions which 'choose for us' and by assumptions which make those choices binding in prescribed ways.

The lesbians in the group sometimes confronted heterosexual accommodations in frustration and anger: "Don't support me by telling me that you're like me - support me by telling me that you too are choosing what you want and that you're getting what you need." "Don't think you're being a buddy by complaining about men - don't assume that I hate men and don't assume that I want you to hate men." "Every time you settle as a woman for less than you want, you settle me too." The heterosexual women focused in their sub-group on validating their own choices and the lesbian women focused in their sub-group on the specifics of what their choice meant for them.

Avoiding the trap of new normative assumptions was essential for the lesbians. Defiance is basically an insecure defensive posture that may depend upon rigid codes for balance. Whether the code be a rejection of motherhood, a rejection of dresses, or a rejection of men, it is a collusion with one's oppression as long as it excludes choice. The ironic inadequacy of defiance as a strategy against oppression is that often one set of assumptions is rejected only to be replaced by another. The danger of continuing to operate only and totally from a posture of defiance is that together with the defensive exclusion of a whole continuum of choices, one excludes a whole continuum of people, culture, ideas, activities, and of course, power. One builds a sub-culture not for the purpose of demanding a legitimate place within society but for the purpose of retreat. That safe retreat may be necessary as a respite from constant harassment and as a supportive base for gathering strength and clarity. But, as a political goal, such a solution is sadly resigned. Our challenge is to move from defiance to self-assertion.

We don't want the lesbian alternative to remain 'illegal'. One lesbian woman wrote in her end evaluation: "I'm more visible as a lesbian than I used to be and I have less of a chip on my shoulder. I used to feel, 'poor me or lucky me, nobody knows what it's like to be me' and now I'm better able to communicate naturally about my life and to expect respect from others. I have also begun to accept heterosexuality as a possible real choice, even for women."

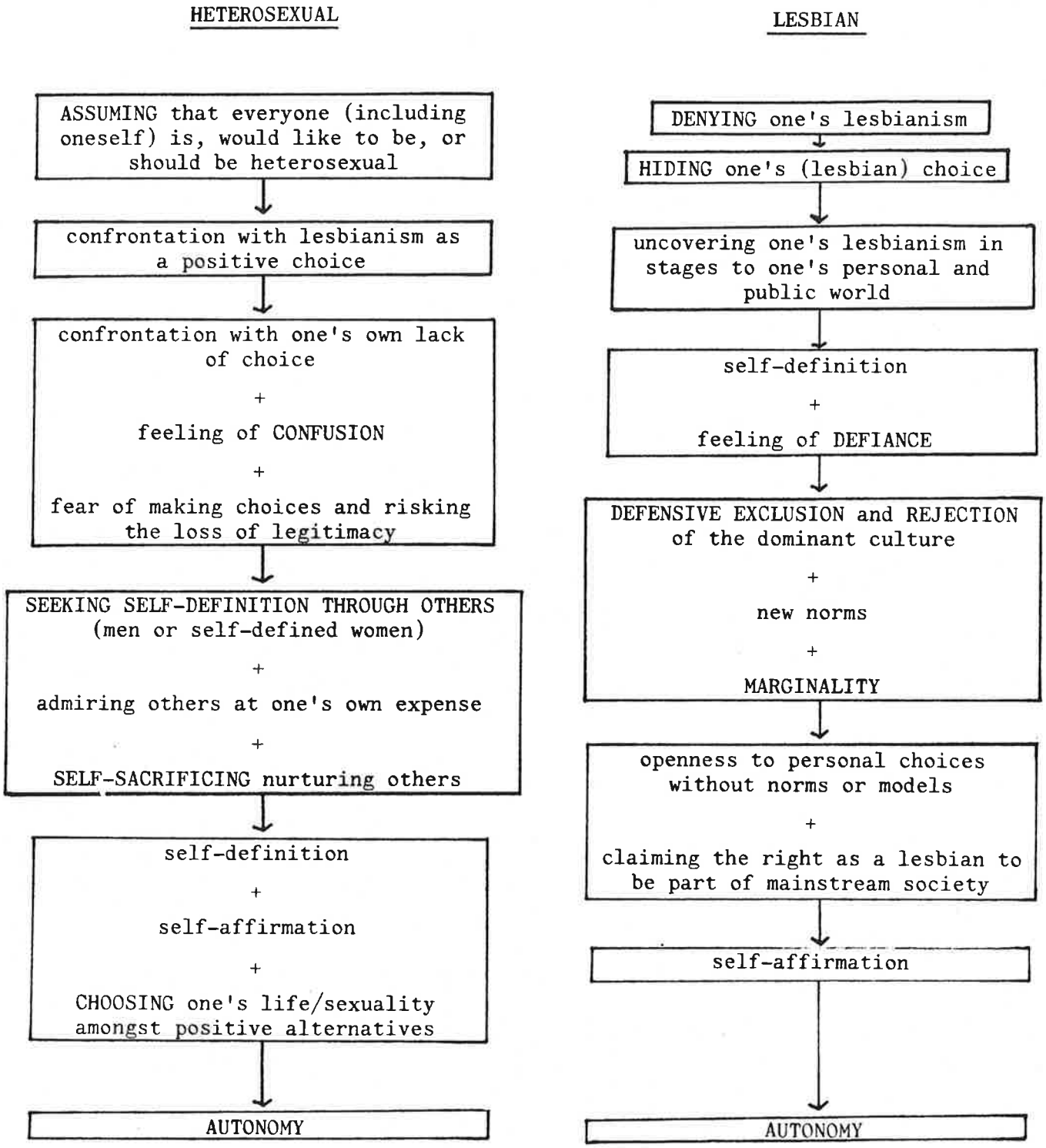
For the heterosexual women, the danger of remaining confused or insecure about one's own identity is that one is bound to seek self-definition through others, and, in particular, through others with greater self-definition, such as men or lesbians. When feminists are 'accused' of all being lesbians, someone is getting understandably nervous about the feminist goal to eliminate assumptions and to insist that women choose. Those heterosexual women who transfer their self-avoiding admiration from men to lesbians have not yet made the leap to self-admiration, self-definition, and choice.

The process toward greater self-assertion for lesbians and self-definition for heterosexuals was neither easy nor consistent within the group. One lesbian woman said, "I like it more and more to be with only lesbian women." And another, "I feel very ambivalent about being in this group. Before it started I was clear about everything and now, through this group I see how big our differences are, also between us lesbian women. I don't know anymore." One heterosexual woman said, "In the beginning I was real excited here, especially about discovering my own background, and then I fell into a big hole of confusion." Another heterosexual woman said, "I was terribly confused at the beginning but now it gets clearer for me. I realize that I don't suffer from lesbian oppression like you lesbians but I do suffer from it."

Indeed, being denied choice is dreadful for everyone. By the end of the group, both the lesbian and the heterosexual choice had gained integrity.

Lesbian women were able to declare their love for a man or for elements of male culture without rejecting their basic lesbian choice and without risking a self-righteous sneer from their heterosexual allies; heterosexual women were able to speak up for the right to lesbian relationships without thinking - and surely saying - that they were standing up for the rights of other women. In this way, lesbians were able to begin relating to heterosexuals with greater respect, trust, and solidarity as women asserting their right to choose. And heterosexuals were able to begin relating to lesbians with greater autonomy, commitment, and a self-esteem to match their esteem for others.

The following chart represents recurring dynamics in several lesbian-heterosexual alliance groups.


HETEROSEXUAL
ASSUMING that everyone (including oneself) is, would like to be, or should be heterosexual
confrontation with lesbianism as a positive choice
confrontation with one's own lack of choice
+
feeling of CONFUSION
+
fear of making choices and risking the loss of legitimacy
SEEKING SELF-DEFINITION THROUGH OTHERS (men or self-defined women)
+
admiring others at one's own expense
+
SELF-SACRIFICING nurturing others
self-definition
+
self-affirmation
+
CHOOSING one's life/sexuality amongst positive alternatives
AUTONOMY
LESBIAN
DENYING one's lesbianism
HIDING one's (lesbian) choice
uncovering one's lesbianism in stages to one's personal and public world
self-definition
+
feeling of DEFIANCE
DEFENSIVE EXCLUSION and REJECTION of the dominant culture
+
new norms
+
MARGINALITY
openness to personal choices without norms or models
+
claiming the right as a lesbian to be part of mainstream society
self-affirmation
AUTONOMY

CONCLUSIONS

I chose to focus each group discussion upon a salient dynamic that emerged within the process. The nuances surrounding that dynamic were, needless to say, complex and would likely add more confusion than clarity to this report. Many of those nuances can be captured, however, by bringing the salient dynamics of each of the three group processes together into a general description. For example, although guilt was the feeling most pronounced among white women, feelings of confusion, isolation, defiance, anger, and banality were also present. Oppression seems to breed a package of psychological processes which are both specific to the particular oppression and to one's position and also general. Judging others, seeking protection, excluding others, seeking reassurance and approval, defining oneself through the other, and seeking specialness by association are all tendencies to which none of us are exempt, although our particular identity and history may give us a stronger disposition in one direction than another. Summing those mechanisms in one bundle again gives a more nuanced, albeit more complicated, picture of each specific dynamic. And, as noted earlier in this report, internalized oppression and internalized domination reinforce each other. Reassuringly, advances toward alliance likewise reinforce each other so that, for example, visibility as a lesbian may equip one to assert herself more powerfully as a Jew or as a white person against racism as well.

Obviously, the processes which evolved within the groups were determined by the starting point of the participants. The choice to participate in an alliance group already reflected a certain consciousness and readiness. Women joining an oppressed sub-group were at the same time assuming a politically-targeted identity and acknowledging their oppression. Women joining a dominant sub-group were assuming a politically-privileged identity and acknowledging their domination. Although there are clearly stages of consciousness, it is misleading to speak of who is further in liberation. We all move through cycles of emotions and we all have unique constellations of oppressions and dominations. For one woman, feeling anger and confusion

and reaching out for contact may be an advancement. For someone else, making choices and feeling her isolation may be a liberating movement. Psychologically,only the individual is a fair criteria of change; interpersonally, the relationship is the only criteria; and politically, only the society as a whole is a true measure of liberation. Those three levels do affect one another. This project has focused upon the psychological and the interpersonal levels with the hope not only of facilitating change for individuals and for relationships, but also of helping to create the conditions for political change.

The organizational and conceptual framework of the project did provide the confrontations for which it was intended. One of those confrontations was the realization that reality is far more varied than we imagined. By focusing upon the norms of dominant status and oppressed status, those norms gained political significance and at the same time lost personal significance. We came to realize that sexuality is no more uniform than skin color and that labelling oneself as a lesbian is no more - or less - literal than labelling oneself as black. We came to realize that the internalized oppression and internalized domination of Jews and non-Jews can shape relationships totally on the basis of political status without having any religious basis. Variations in sexual preferance, variations in appearance, and variations in religious preference are in fact obscured by the political illusion that there are only two groups, the dominant majority (which is often not a majority at all) and the oppressed minority (which, as with people of color, may be a huge majority in the world). The norms of domination do not reflect the rich varieties of humanity. Fortunately, none of us are straight enough and none of us are pure enough and none of us are ordinary enough to represent all people.

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Many women have invested this project with energy, commitment, time, thought, and struggle. I want in particular to give credit to the group organizers and facilitators with whom I worked: Nurith de Vries, Eloise Sewell, Tineke Sjenitzer and Bernie de Bie have been co-responsible for the groups of Jews-non-Jews. Lex Jacott, Lya Djadoenath, Julia da Lima, Joke Hermsen and Anja Meulenbelt have been co-responsible for the black-white groups. Flora Kleynjan, Anneke van Wijk, Christien Quispel and Ellen van Aggelen have led the lesbian-heterosexual groups. Helga van Vondelen and Anneke van Wijk have organized and facilitated the physically different-physically-usual group. And Mieneke Bavinck, Gosina Mandersloot and Lindsey Bogle have organized and facilitated the prostitution work group. Extra credit goes to Nurith de Vries for facilitating the workshops on class differences.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The project was sponsored by the Institute of Clinical Psychology and Personality at the University of Utrecht and the Institute of Advanced Social Studies (Called IVABO) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
2. An initial report including an elaboration of group methods is published in Dutch: Gail Pheterson, "Bondgenootschap tussen vrouwen: Een theoretiese en empiriese analyse van onderdrukking en bevrijding," Psychologie en Maatscappij (Psychology and Society) 20 (September 1982): 399-424. The present report is based upon two years of continuous simultaneous participation in (and facilitation/organization of) black-white, Jewish-non-Jewish, and lesbian-heterosexual groups. Groups have also been run to explore divisions between physically different and physically usual women and between women working as prostitutes and other women.
3. After much discussion, the women whose personal or ancestoral origins were in (formerly) colonialized nations decided to identify themselves uniformly as black rather than specifically by nationality or culture and rather than third world, colored, not white, etc. The cultural heritages represented were Surinamese, Antillian, Mollucca, and Indonesian. The decision to unite under one strong color identification was an act of solidarity for the purpose of exposing and resisting common racist oppression.
4. I give credit to the women's movement, the Re-evaluation Counseling community, Radical Psychiatry, and the work of Paulo Freire for the development of this concept.
5. These are available from the author.
6. All citations have been translated from the original Dutch by the author.
7. This initiative developed into an elaborate experimental study of black and white change processes and the effect of self-esteem on attitudes toward black and white others. A research report is being prepared in Dutch and in English by the author together with Lya Djadoenath, Bert Tellegen, and Lies Kamerbeek of the University of Utrecht.