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Tool for Transformation: Cooperative Inquiry as a Process for Healing from Internalized Oppression

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Abstract: *This paper documents how cooperative inquiry can be a transformative tool for groups – in this case, a diverse group of Jewish women – to make meaning from their experience of internalized oppression and to create healing strategies.*

“The purpose of human inquiry is not so much the search for truth, but to heal”
(Peter Reason, 1994, p. 10)

Purpose

Cooperative inquiry is an easily-accessible yet potentially transformative tool, enabling groups to explore their own lived experience of internalized oppression and to create strategies for healing. In this paper I describe my doctoral research with a group of Jewish women, a group in which I was a participant. Our inquiry together affected us profoundly, leading us to conclude that other groups could use cooperative inquiry for their own explorations and healing.

Cooperative inquiry enables a small group of people to systematically direct themselves in making meaning from their own experience. British researchers John Heron (1996) and Peter Reason (1994) developed this process as a formal methodology which valorizes research *with* people as opposed to research *on* people. Groups select an area of inquiry and facilitate themselves non-hierarchically, holistically, democratically, over a period of time. Cooperative inquiry differs from support groups in its combined use of five key tools: *systematic action/reflection cycles*; *full participation by each member*; *the incorporation of many ways of knowing*, such as storytelling, movement, art, music, and accessing the emotional realm; *validity procedures to deepen group learning*; and *critical subjectivity*. Geared towards enabling participants to improve their practice in the world, this process is empowering through its validation of knowledge-creation by people from all backgrounds, education and experiences.

Internalized oppression is an involuntary reaction to oppression which originates outside one's group and which results in group members loathing themselves, disliking others in their group, and

blaming themselves for the oppression – rather than realizing that these beliefs are constructed in them by oppressive socio-economic political systems (Brown, 1995; Schwartz, 1995; Sherover-Marcuse, 1994). Internalized oppression is a difficult meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1991) to transform because of the deep emotions involved and because society continues to bombard oppressed groups with destructive messages. To counteract these deeply embedded meaning perspectives requires a process of transformative learning – cooperative inquiry offers such an intervention strategy.

I initiated this inquiry because I believe that transforming self-hatred can liberate people, so that we no longer need accept limits on ourselves, on what we can do, on how the world can be – which is emancipatory learning (Mezirow, 1991); therefore, healing internalized oppression is a path to empowering a social action practice in the most profound sense.

Theoretical Perspectives

The use of cooperative inquiry as a strategy for emancipatory learning is based in three theoretical perspectives: Mathias Finger's "new paradigm for social action" that induces "a process of personal transformation that inevitably will influence social, cultural and political life" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 189); John Heron's (1996) holistic epistemology in cooperative inquiry, which valorizes the interaction of experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of knowing; and the philosophical perspective of liberation theory as developed by Ricky Sherover-Marcuse (1994) (see above explanation of internalized oppression).

Strategy

This descriptive case study documents the process of our ten-month cooperative inquiry exploring internalized Jewish oppression. The 10 group participants were diverse in: age; socio-economic background; geographical region growing up (U.S. & Montreal); education; sexual orientation; religious/secular background; physical disabilities/abilities; and ethnic background (Eastern European & Iraqi). I collected data by recording and transcribing our ten six-hour inquiry meetings as well as one-hour individual exit interviews, and I also wrote personal reflections after each meeting. In analyzing data, I looked for two areas of information: the impact of the inquiry process and significant themes regarding internalized anti-Semitism.

Findings: Creating a Culture of Resistance, a Community of Healing

Eight interwoven themes emerged that illustrate how cooperative inquiry enabled our group to begin healing our internalized oppression. I organized these under three categories: “The experience of oppression” – which includes themes of recognizing shared feelings and the similarities between internalized oppressions; “Embracing identity”--which includes themes of choosing visibility and validating Jewish issues as important; and “Creating a learning environment” – which includes themes of attention and appreciation, using holistic tools, extended time period, and creating a culture of collaboration. The first two theme categories illustrate the perspectives of liberation theory and a new paradigm for social action; the third category flows from an holistic epistemological perspective.

The Experience of Oppression

Recognizing shared feeling – “*There’s nothing wrong with me!*” As a result of sharing our lived experience with each other, women articulated how empowering and relieving it was to learn that our feelings were not personal “pathologies” – but that we shared a commonality of internalized oppression which was a direct response to external oppression. This was one of the major group learning experiences. “The consensus was so broad on so many things, from women who were from all over the country, from different generations,” Deena explained. “There’s a communal experience [of internalized oppression] – that means that it is

important. There’s something powerful about the systemic nature of that.”

We realized that we shared similar experiences of fear: feeling like we never quite “belonged” anywhere, that we couldn’t show our true selves because we were either “too much” or “not enough”, trying to be perfect so we wouldn’t be attacked or abandoned, feeling responsible for everything going well because we would be blamed if there was trouble. Emily revealed, “One of the most important things I got out of the group was realizing the overlap of patterns so many of us had. I’ve always thought of my patterns as my family’s personal dysfunction – and seeing them as part of Jewish women’s internalized oppression was eye-opening! There’s a connection hearing everybody say that thing of ‘not belonging’, or ‘so often I feel like I’m too much or not enough’. For me it was a major shift of perspective to realize, ‘Oh *you* feel like that too?’” Penny echoed, “When I talked about not feeling worthy, sometimes Elly’s words exactly echoed mine, even though our backgrounds are so different. That was stunning and validating.”

Similarities in internalized oppressions. Through sharing stories, we became aware of the interrelationship between the internalization of anti-Semitism, sexism, homophobia, racism, ableism and fat oppression. Gerri told us that she had “spent a million years of my life imagining they’ll come up into the Castro [a visibly gay neighborhood] and try to get us. It’s either about being a Jew or being a queer.” And in addition to feeling self-hatred from taking in anti-Semitic messages, MJ said that “Feeling so stigmatized for being disabled and a butch dyke and fat, has brought on a sense of shame. This culture makes us feel that way. The negative stuff gets to you after awhile; I get really enraged, but I also start taking it in.”

From her work teaching voice, Emily illustrated an overlap between internalized sexism and anti-Semitism – while also demonstrating the validity procedure of “devil’s advocacy,” by challenging a group assumption that certain behavior was an aspect only of internalized *Jewish* oppression: “It’s a common theme around women in general, it’s not just unique to Jews, how women have been taught not to take up space – vocally, physically, in many other ways.” Experiencing commonality with internalized racism, Elly related to her African-American partner’s struggle “about who’s black and

who isn't, what you have to do and be in order to qualify. Just like I've never thought I was Jewish enough. I envied my sister who has dark skin and dark curly hair. It's that same thing, when someone looks at me, do they see Jew? I don't think so, and I feel guilty". In a related example, Amy articulated: "[In the group] we were saying there's a Jewish thing about perfection, always feeling pressure to do things right. The next day I was working with a client of mine who's Japanese, and the same phrases, word for word, were coming out of her mouth; she could have been one of us sitting in the room".

Embracing Identity

Choosing visibility – “*You're Jewish!*” By visibly showing ourselves as Jews in non-Jewish contexts, we learned that claiming Jewish identity can be a positive and connecting experience, contradicting internalized feelings of invisibility, shame and marginalization. For example, during our inquiry “action” cycles, Amy decided to wear the Jewish skullcap, or yarmulke, in public on the Sabbath – unusual for a woman to do. “I thought, what would it be like if somebody could know that I was Jewish from 20, 30, 40 feet away!”, Amy told us. Although she had to face the fear of calling attention to herself as Jewish, overall she found it to be a “very positive” experience and a way to make “really great connections with other Jews!”

Wearing the yarmulke while waiting for a late bus, Amy described “waiting and waiting, and people are getting in a progressively worse humor. And then the thought flashed into my mind, ‘They're gonna blame me, 'cause I'm a scapegoat in the situation [as a Jew]’. It was the wildest thing! I felt like I was making myself into a target, even though realistically nothing was really going to happen to me that day.” She continued, “It was the first time I ever came right out that way and identified as Jewish, and I was hit with a tidal wave of fear. But [now] I feel this pride and confidence in being a Jew that I *never* had before. And it really helped knowing I had this group to come back to, that you all were behind me.” Amy's powerful experience demonstrates how repeated cycles of taking action, and reflecting later in the group, can facilitate learning.

Validating Jewish issues as important – *confronting anti-Semitism*. We learned to support each

other in raising Jewish issues in non-Jewish environments, to confront anti-Semitism, and to encourage one another's leadership as Jews – which contradicts both the external and internal oppression of discounting the Jewish experience. For example, Deena realized that her colleagues' dislike of a woman at her workplace was based in anti-Semitism. She explained, “I saw injustice happening to her, and I reached out to her where I might not have before. Because of our group, I saw one moment as an ‘educating ally’ moment, and that felt good; I challenged people in their extreme dislike, saying that I felt it was unwarranted”. The inquiry experience helped Penny raise Jewish issues without embarrassment: “I feel much stronger in myself in this identity, and that's been huge! Just like being around people who are confronting racism helps me confront racism more – when Jewish oppression is discussed, that creates an environment where I feel more able to confront anti-Semitism”. Deena reflected the importance to her of “having Jewish leaders like Penny hold up that Jewish liberation is important – because it's easy to slip into thinking that it's not important”. “The way to handle it is not to run from being Jewish”, MJ reminded us. “It's to end the oppression!”

Creating a Learning Environment

Attention and appreciation as contradictions to negative messages. Together we created a context of story-sharing, attention, and appreciation that was a positive contradiction to the destructive societal messages we received as Jewish girls and women. “I felt very heard, and I never have had that experience on this kind of material”, Gerri shared. Emily said that listening to the stories gave her “an incredible education about internalized Jewish oppression”, motivating her to “go towards healing strategies – to realize that it's changeable!” This learning environment gave her “a place where I can belong with other Jewish women and be *all* of me – the coarse parts, the parts that bug the shit out of other people, the parts that are insightful. All the parts of me were welcome: around class, around heritage, around my family's history, around being a lesbian – all those things that in other situations are “x'ed out”. MJ echoed Emily's experience: “Making these deep connections with other Jewish women is incredibly healing. It's wonderful, I'm in this group and I'm not getting rejected!”

Using holistic tools – accessing our hearts. Cooperative inquiry’s holistic epistemology supported our sharing stories, art, movement, songs, co-counseling, poetry, theatre, dance, and Jewish ritual to access different ways of knowing, and to help us build closeness, community and connection. When asked if the group had been a learning experience for her, Judith replied, “Oh yeah, but not learning in the *head* way.” MJ added, “Everything we’re doing is alive and living and comes from the heart.” And when Elly felt that the group wasn’t “going deep enough”, members brought in a role-play about internalized anti-Semitism and voice/movement exercises; these took us to a new level of closeness which many spoke of as the high point of the inquiry experience. Emily explained, “It was very creative and we were just ‘improving’ – and that opens you in this very different way.” At another point, one woman read a moving poem about her “nosejob”: “What was healing was being able to process traumatic things from the past and be able to release emotion”, she later explained. “I felt safe enough to be vulnerable, I was supported, I was embraced with the group.”

During one meeting, MJ spoke about the horrors that have happened to Jews, asking why so many people fear and hate Jews. Penny suggested to her, “This is just something I can imagine you saying: ‘Hey Penny guess what? The Jews survived!’ MJ tried it: “Hey Penny guess what? We survived! The Jews survived!” She took a deep breath: “It’s true, isn’t it? We survived. We’re still here. Despite everything!” Her eyes filled with tears. The next meeting she brought us a new song she had written, with the chorus:

*They mocked our language, our religion too;
they taught their people to scorn the Jews.
And though we suffered and many of us died, we
fought for freedom and we survived!*

The song ended with a verse of solidarity with the people of Tibet:

*Many tried to silence you, but this they cannot
do
All your voices will be heard, and you’ll survive
just like the Jews!*

Extended time period = creation of closeness & community. Meeting for ten six-hour sessions over ten months helped create a community of healing – of closeness, trust, safety and connection – which contradicted the isolation, distrust and fear which

we found characteristic of internalized anti-Semitism. Emily was the only parent in the group, making it difficult for her to honor our time commitment; yet she realized that our amount of meeting time affected her inquiry experience: “There’s something about the *consistency* of the group over a long period of time – It’s like people who *really* wanted to be here. And as I’ve gotten to care about everybody in the group, that could only happen from the length of time”. She continued: “It’s not a group I would have defined as a touchy-feely close-in group (laughs). It’s political, we disagree. But when I think of the last two sessions that we had, this openness and love was right there, that was created by us going through each of those steps, that I don’t know if we could’ve gotten to in any other way. *And it had really changed over the time of the group* (italics added). We worked hard for it, we fought for it – and then there it was! I can tangibly see us and feel us when we all had our arms around each other. There was this softness and sweetness that felt like an amazing reward for all the hard work.” Judith agreed: “It doesn’t matter what we talk about, just that we have stayed together this long. That’s where the healing is – in community.”

Creating a culture of collaboration. Deena testified to the strength of our democratic collaborative process, a strong value of cooperative inquiry: “I’ve always been somebody who has believed in the power of collective knowledge, or people working together, over individual brainstorming. And in this case it was very true.” Emily recalled when we were bringing our stories together to create statements about our experiences of internalized anti-Semitism: “We were all sunk into the couch, feeling ‘Oh god, that’s who we are? How are we gonna live?’ And yet there was something so powerful about having it be tangible, written – and we had come to it as a group! I don’t know that one person could ever have done what we did. This was the impetus to say, “Okay, what are the healing strategies?”

Expressing profound learning from our collaboration, Amy said that she “never understood before that I had imposed my own values on people. My grandparents were very materialistic, and I had a lot of contempt about that; [so] it was good to see that [materialism] in someone I had respect for in the group. Now I understand how it makes sense for her in her life. I got to understand things I never under-

stood before.” Judith revealed that the collaborative process itself had almost meant more to her than our topic: “I’ve had insights in the group, those flashes of ‘Oh yeah! Of course!’ And the world makes sense in a new way! I watched myself becoming more brave, exposing myself, becoming vulnerable. The issue is important – but for me the *process* has been *really* important.”

Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice

As countries become increasingly multicultural, it is crucial that adult educators respond to diverse populations’ needs. This research illustrates the powerful impact of cooperative inquiry in supporting a marginalized group to explore their experience and transform their perspectives – as demonstrated by the themes about “The experience of oppression” and “embracing identity.” This study also shows the value of this method in stressing full participation from each group member, which helps equalize inevitable social and personal power differentials within the group – as illuminated in findings from ‘creating a culture of collaboration’.

The conclusions also demonstrate – from the “Creating a learning environment” themes – that once people learn skills for cooperative inquiry, they no longer need an adult educator. Instead, this strategy supports people in empowering themselves as they direct their own learning; it validates their abilities to create knowledge from their own experience. Overall, by employing major aspects of cooperative inquiry – action/reflection cycles, full participation, holistic epistemology, critical reflection, and validity procedures – this study shows

how this tool was effectively used as an educational intervention strategy to facilitate emancipation in co-inquirers.

Perhaps Deena’s words, which are a direct legacy of Mathias Finger’s new paradigm for social action and Ricky Sherover Marcuse’s liberation theory, best illustrate the value of cooperative inquiry to adult educators devoted to systemic transformation: “Since I’ve committed my life to social change, the more that I can release and work through – and this group initiated that process – then the more powerful I will be. That feels like a huge shift: the potential to increase my power, rather than just changing my area of work.”

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