Liberatory Knowledge and Just Social Practices

The pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice.  
(MacKinnon 1982, 343)

I am a deep and longstanding fan of Catharine MacKinnon’s work, both her published work and her activism. Her insights have inspired my research for the past twenty years. Recently I have been working the role of consciousness raising in ideology critique. As usual, I have turned to MacKinnon for insight.

On MacKinnon’s view, ordinary scientific and philosophical critique of argument and evidence is helpful to feminism, but isn’t sufficient as a basis for a feminist movement. “By operating as legitimating ideology, the scientific standard for verifying reality can reinforce a growing indignation [towards sexism], but it cannot create feminism that was not already there. Knowing objective facts does not do what consciousness does.”¹ (MacKinnon 1989, 101) But what does “consciousness” do?

MacKinnon suggests that consciousness raising is:

… the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women’s social experience as women live through it….Consciousness raising, by contrast [to scientific inquiry] inquires into an intrinsically social situation, in the mixture of thought and materiality which comprises gender in its broadest sense. (MacKinnon 1989, 83)

On the next page she continues, “The process is transformative as well as perceptive, since thought and thing are inextricably and reciprocally constitutive of women’s oppression…” (MacKinnon 1989, 84)

As a rough start we can say, then, that consciousness raising reveals the way in which social thought and social reality are interdependent, offers a critical perspective on the meanings implicit in this thought-imbued reality, and proposes alternative meanings gained from a perspective within the social context in question. Given the interdependence of social thought and reality, a change of meaning can transform the social world. This calls, however, for a new sort of (or at least a new branch of) epistemology:

¹ From the context of this quote (a chapter of her book entitled “Consciousness Raising”), it is clear that MacKinnon has in mind “consciousness raising” and not just awareness when she speaks of ‘consciousness’ as doing something more than ‘objective knowledge’.
This epistemology does not at all deny that a relation exists between thought and some reality other than thought, or between human activity (mental or otherwise) and the products of that activity. Rather, it redefines the epistemological issue from being a scientific one, the relation between knowledge and objective reality, to a problem of the relation of consciousness to social being. (MacKinnon 1989, 99)

MacKinnon is clearly drawing on a Marxist background here², but rather than turning back to Marx for insight, I’d instead like us to focus on the question: what should be thought in those domains where what is thought (at least partly) both determines and is determined by its object, and what role does consciousness raising play in enabling liberatory knowledge of the social world?

I. Consciousness and social practice

To begin, let us consider the role of consciousness in the constitution of social practices and social structures. MacKinnon has never been sympathetic to postmodern views that take social reality to be anything less than fully real.

Epistemologically speaking, women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face. No matter how they think about it, try to think it out of existence or into a different shape, it remains independently real, keeps forcing them into certain molds. No matter what they think or do, they cannot get out of it. It has all the indeterminacy of a bridge abutment hit at sixty miles per hour. (MacKinnon 1989, 123; see also MacKinnon 1987, 57)

The social world is materially real – there is nothing immaterial about rape – and yet it is also partly constituted by our ways of thinking, feeling, speaking.

I’ve suggested elsewhere that a useful model for understanding how “thought and thing are inextricably and reciprocally constitutive of women’s oppression” (and the social world, more generally) takes social practices to be sets of interdependent schemas and resources. (Haslanger 2007, 2011)

Roughly, schemas consist in culturally shared concepts and background beliefs that help us interpret and organize information. Both concepts and beliefs, in the sense intended, store information and are the

² A famous quote from Marx is useful for context: “In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material forces of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society - the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life determines the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” (Marx 1859)
basis for various behavioral dispositions. Resources are things of all sorts – human, nonhuman, animate, or not – “that can be used to enhance or maintain power.” (Sewell 1992, 20). In social reality, schemas and resources are both causally and constitutively interdependent. Consider food, let’s say, corn, for example. An ear of corn can be viewed as something to eat, as a commodity to be sold, as a religious symbol. In other words, we can apply different schemas to the object, and the schemas frame our consciousness of the object. The different schemas not only offer modes of interpretation, but license different ways of interacting with the corn. Actions based on these different schemas have an effect on the ear of corn, e.g., it might be cooked for food, or the kernels removed to be shipped, or dried and hung in a prominent place to be worshipped. The effects of our actions then influence the schema. If the corn sells for a good price, its value is enhanced and the farmer may seek ways to grow it more efficiently, possibly investing in new and different varieties.

How does this help us understand women’s oppression? Female bodies are resources: we are valued for our sexual, reproductive, domestic, economic potentiality. The schemas for these different frames situate our bodies within different practices and license different actions. On MacKinnon’s view, the multiple schemas for women have common that we are submissive or subordinate to those with male bodies and license an erotic response to this subordination. Just as eating, selling, or worshipping corn is not something that just happens “in our heads” but is materially real, so are the social practices that consist of gender schemas and sexed bodies.

Practices depend on shared schemas, but they require individuals to enact and re-enact them. “…social structures, while they confront us as external and coercive, do not exist apart from our collective actions and thoughts as we apply schemas to make sense of the world and deploy resources to affect people and things.” (Silbey & Ewick 1998, 41 my italics). This dependence on reiterated human action also allows for revisions of both the schemas and the resources, making individuals potential agents of social change. A corn blight or drought will affect our practices involving corn because the resource will become scarce; environmental or food activism can bring about a change in the schemas for corn that call for and license different actions. Likewise, on one hand, the creation of all-women
communities affects our practices materially because men are not there to defer to, and this change in resources, in turn, prompts a reevaluation of our schemas. (MacKinnon 1989, 86) Sometimes we have to act differently in order to think differently. On the other hand, feminist insight can guide action and through the influence of feminist media, literature and film, law and social policy, we change our schemas. Sometimes we have to think differently in order to act differently.

Traditional consciousness raising groups offer a context for disrupting both resources and schemas (though, of course, not all consciousness raising occurs in CR groups), and this can alter our practices if the change takes hold. Mackinnon holds that feminist method is consciousness raising: “…feminist method is consciousness raising: the collective critical reconstitution of the meaning of women's social experience, as women live through it.” (MacKinnon 1982, 543) But what exactly is the epistemology of consciousness raising? How does it provide liberatory knowledge? How does it contribute creating more just social practices?

II. Critique

How does consciousness raising offer a critique of existing practices, and on what terms should we evaluate the critique, if not in ordinary epistemic terms (truth, justification, etc). MacKinnon’s account of consciousness raising has a number of connected elements. Here are some examples of what she says:

Consciousness raising is a face-to-face social experience that strikes at the fabric of meaning of social relations between and among women and men by calling their givenness into question and reconstituting their meaning in a transformed and critical way. The most apparent quality of this method is its aim of grasping women's situation as it is lived through. The process identifies the problem of women's subordination as a problem that can be accessed through women's consciousness, or lived knowing, of her situation. This implicitly posits that women's social being is in part constituted or at least can be known through women's lived-out view of themselves. Consciousness raising attacks this problem by unraveling and reordering what every woman “knows” because she has lived it, and in so doing forms and reforms, recovers and changes, its meaning. This is accomplished through using the very instrument – women experiencing how they experience themselves – that is the product of the process to be understood. (MacKinnon 1989, 95-6)

The point of the [consciousness raising] process was not so much that hitherto undisclosed facts were unearthed or that denied perceptions were corroborated or even that reality was tested, although all these happened. It was not only that silence was broken and that speech occurred. The point was, and is, that this process moved the reference point for truth and thereby the definition of reality as such. (MacKinnon 1989, 87)
Method in this sense organizes the apprehension of truth; it determines what counts as evidence and defines what is taken as verification. Instead of engaging the debate over which came (or comes) first, sex or class, the task for theory is to explore the conflicts and connections between the methods that found it meaningful to analyze social conditions in terms of those categories in the first place. (MacKinnon 1982, 527)

In these quotes (and throughout her discussion), one finds several themes:

(i) Consciousness raising reveals the workings of social structures “from the inside” and, more specifically, from the point of view of the subordinate, e.g., by “grasping women’s situation as it is lived through, ““accessed through women’s consciousness, or lived knowing, of her situation.” (Also MacKinnon 1982, 535, 536-7)

(ii) Consciousness raising disrupts hegemony and renders what is taken for granted explicit, and so subject to criticism. It “unravels and reorders what every woman “knows”.’’ It calls the “givenness” of social meanings into question.

(iii) Consciousness raising reveals that how things are is not how they must be because it “forms and reforms, recovers and changes, [social] meaning.” It “reconstitutes” the meaning of social relations “in a transformed and critical way.” As MacKinnon says elsewhere, “Women’s situation cannot be truly known for what it is, in the feminist sense, without knowing that it can be other than it is.” (MacKinnon, 1989, 101)

(iv) Consciousness raising isn’t primarily a process of uncovering facts; rather, it offers an alternative “way of seeing” that shifts “the reference point for truth,” “what counts as evidence,” and what categories are apt.

Summarizing these points, we might say that consciousness raising has an experiential element, an unmasking element, a contingency element, and a new paradigm element.³

³ Elizabeth Hackett (1996) offers an account of MacKinnon’s epistemology in terms of Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shifts. Although I am more comfortable with the terminology of schemas, there are important similarities between paradigms and schemas. Note also that I’m not claiming that these are the only important elements of consciousness raising.
If what’s claimed for consciousness raising, as a method, is that it leads to knowledge and liberation, one might raise concerns about several of these points. Women are not always reliable authorities about their own experience: we are as subject to self-deception, wishful thinking, faulty generalization, and impoverished concepts as anyone; living under oppressive conditions makes self-understanding, if anything, harder. And it is unclear what it means to shift a “reference point for truth” or the “definition of reality as such.” Moreover, simply knowing that things can be different and changing how we think now does not guarantee that the alternative ways envisioned are better or more just.

In responding to such concerns, it helps to situate MacKinnon’s views about consciousness raising within a theory of social practices of the sort I sketched above. I’ll argue, however, that although MacKinnon is right that liberatory knowledge requires a critical disruption of hegemonic categories and methods for reconstituting social meanings that take the details of women’s lives seriously, a normative theory is still necessary in order to evaluate the adequacy of the new meanings and the practices they partly constitute.

Recall that the model of social practices I’ve sketched: practices are composed of interdependent schemas and resources. I’d like to suggest that consciousness raising involves a change in schemas. I’ve characterized schemas briefly, but what are they exactly? Psychologists use the term ‘schema’ to refer to cognitive structures that provide us with heuristics for processing and storing information; these are typically tacit. Schemas consist in concepts and shared background beliefs that make certain phenomena salient, thus affecting attention; they shape memory by selecting from an experience those aspects that fit the schema; they influence information gathering by disposing us to pre-select what is important and what isn’t; they have a significant effect on inference patterns and decisions because they bias what information we process and what predictions we make. (Hollander and Howard 2000, 342-44) Although schemas are often described in narrowly cognitive terms, they also integrate emotional and motivational components. (See, e.g., Gendler 2008) Sociologists and anthropologists use the term ‘schema’ somewhat differently, emphasizing the ways in which cultures store information in narratives, conceptual dichotomies, shared background assumptions, “common sense,” and the like. (Sewell 1992, Howard
A plausible account of schemas, and social cognition more generally, recognizes that it is no accident that there is a parallel between individual cognitive structures and collective cultural structures.

In the context of consciousness raising, tacit schemas are made explicit and so available for critical reflection (this involves the experiential and unmasking elements). Such reflection invites us to attend to aspects of experience that were ignored or occluded; it allows us to reconsider the inferences we typically draw and expectations we bring to experience (this includes the experiential element and contingency element). The process also involves attempts to explain our selective attention, memory, and scripts for action, and consider how we might perceive, think, and act differently (this includes both the contingency and new paradigm elements). Of course there are better and worse, more and less superficial, plausible, and coherent ways of doing this. No one suggests that consciousness raising is infallible, and MacKinnon says explicitly that it is extremely difficult: “Sexism is seen to be all of a piece and so much a part of the omnipresent background of life that a massive effort of collective concentration is required even to discern that it has edges. Consciousness raising is such an effort.” (MacKinnon 1989, 90)

But one might hope that we could evaluate the results of consciousness raising by considering the truth or justification for the claims the method yields. But this option seems to be ruled out by MacKinnon’s suggestion that truth, evidence, and even “reality” don’t remain stable through the process. In a quote we started with, MacKinnon claims that the epistemological issue shifts “from being a scientific one, the relation between knowledge and objective reality, to a problem of the relation of consciousness to social being.” (MacKinnon 1989, 99) How do we evaluate changes in consciousness with respect to social being? Yet again we seem to be lacking tools for evaluating whether our reflective process has been successful.

The goal of consciousness raising, in slightly different terms, is ideology critique. Although there are huge controversies about the notion of ideology, and critique, an important debate concerns whether ideology should be understood and evaluated in epistemic or practical terms. (Eagleton 2007) If ideology is a set of beliefs, then it would seem that it should be evaluated in terms of truth, falsity, and related
notions (Shelby 2003); if it is a way of being in the world, a set of culturally tutored dispositions, then it should be evaluated in practical, even moral, terms, e.g., does it serve our collective interests to live in this way? (Taylor 1985/1971)

Progress can be made on this issue by considering the conceptual rather than the attitudinal aspect of schemas. As mentioned above, schemas provide a way of storing information and include both concepts, beliefs, and other propositional attitudes. If we assume that ideology consists of propositions that we (typically) believe, then traditional epistemic critique is warranted. But then it is not clear how or whether pragmatic critique is legitimate, for the aim of belief is truth, and criticizing a belief simply for being impractical or unjust seems problematic. However, if ideology includes concepts, then a combined form of epistemic/pragmatic evaluation is more promising.

How do we evaluate concepts? The first point to note is that concepts, themselves, are neither true nor false, e.g., the concept loud is neither true nor false. Instead, the question for concepts is whether it is apt or not. Is the concept apt when applied to a particular object, say, someone’s singing? But more generally, we can ask: Should we have this or that concept in our repertoire at all? If so, how we should construe it, e.g. should we employ the concept of the underclass, and if so, how should it be used? Elizabeth Anderson sketches what concept critique involves:

A critique of a concept is not a rejection of that concept, but an exploration of its various meanings and limitations. One way to expose the limitations of a concept is by introducing new concepts that have different meanings but can plausibly contend for some of the same uses to which the criticized concept is typically put. The introduction of such new concepts gives us choices about how to think that we did not clearly envision before. Before envisioning these alternatives, our use of the concept under question is dogmatic. We deploy it automatically, unquestioningly, because it seems as if it is the inevitable conceptual framework within which inquiry must proceed. But envisioning alternatives, we convert dogmas into tools; ideas that we can choose to use or not, depending on how well the use of these ideas suits our investigative purposes. (Anderson 2001, 22)

In order to create the critical distance that gives us “choice,” critique need not introduce a wholly new concept, but can just suggest a revision or rethinking. Ideology critique disrupts conceptual dogmatism

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4 Roughly, the underclass consists of those who are situated at the bottom of a class hierarchy, below the working class. Sometimes they are characterized as not only unemployed, but unemployable. Controversies about the term include its homogenizing and demonizing tendencies.
and extends this method further to other representational tools, capacities, and culturally mediated patterns of response; it raises questions about their aptness, what they capture and, importantly, what they leave out, distort, or obscure.  

So one way to understand MacKinnon when she says that the point of consciousness raising is not to unearth undisclosed facts, but to change the “reference point for truth” and to “[re]organize the apprehension of truth,” is that consciousness raising offers an expansion or revision of our concepts and, in many cases, demands altogether new concepts. The reference point for truth thereby changes, not because reality is somehow “up to us,” but because propositions can be articulated and evaluated as true or false that were not available to us to be thought or considered before. Consciousness raising, then, draws on women’s experience (or the experience of the subordinated and silenced more generally) to expand the phenomena to be considered and captured by our concepts. It reveals that there are alternative ways of carving the phenomena, and calls upon us to explain and justify why we are working with the concepts we do. And it encourages the formation of new (or revised) concepts that better accommodate the lived experience of women (the subordinate). This, in turn, enables us to access facts (understood and noticed using the new concepts) that were not accessible before, and changes our understanding of reality. Given also that our social practices are partly constituted by the framework of concepts and beliefs we employ, our social world actually changes: we act differently, we related to others and to the material world differently.

Although adding to MacKinnon’s epistemology the idea of conceptual critique and situating her view within a theory of social practices provides a way to pull together several strands of her view, the question still remains, when is different better? On what terms do we evaluate whether the new concepts are an improvement, whether the new schema yields more just practices? In some of her work, Elizabeth Anderson suggests that a reflective self-endorsement test is the best tool we have to judge the adequacy of any attitude, framework, or epistemic practice:

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5 Miranda Fricker (2007) introduces the term ‘hermeneutic disablement’ and discusses the kinds of epistemic and political injustice that arise when our concepts fail us.
Reflective endorsement is the only test for whether a consideration counts as a reason for having any attitude or engaging in any practice of inquiry: we ask, on reflecting on the ways the consideration could or does influence our attitudes and practices and the implications of its influencing us, whether we can endorse its influencing us in those ways. If we can reflectively endorse its influence, we count the consideration as a reason for our attitudes or practice. (Anderson 1995, 53)

A knowledge practice is rational to the extent that it promotes such critical self-reflections and responds to them by checking or canceling out the unreliable belief-formation mechanisms and enabling the reliable ones. (Anderson 1995, 55)

Admittedly, Anderson is right that as individuals all we have in order to determine what attitudes we should hold is a process of critical reflection and something like a self-endorsement test. However, it isn’t clear to me that we can be content with this when it comes to the critique of social practices and the schemas that constitute them (and I think Anderson would agree). It may be that I emerge from consciousness raising with a new framework for understanding and acting within my social world. Even if I endorse the change, this new framework may simply throw me from the frying pan into the fire, and more importantly for the purposes of social critique, it may promote yet new forms of injustice. For example, the schema (and its component concepts organizing my experience) that I have endorsed may be those of a misogynist religious sect, or the Tea Party, or even a less problematic but still oppressive social frame. When are the concepts consciousness raising yields apt? When are schemas epistemically and socially acceptable?

My own strategy in this context is to turn to a theory of justice: we should endorse schemas that constitute just social practices. Consciousness raising is not, itself, a theory of justice; ideology critique is only the first stage of a process that requires a normative theory to complete. I cannot find in MacKinnon’s discussion an account of the normative basis for social critique, the basis that will reject some changes of consciousness and (and corresponding social being) as inadequate or unjust, and will justify the practices that constitute a feminist society. Without this, I’m concerned that we will be left with a feminist project that encourages liberation from existing oppressive structures, but cannot distinguish our replacing them with new oppressive structures from replacing them structures that are truly just. I wholly support resistance to utopianism, and find such resistance in MacKinnon: “Take your
foot off our necks, then we will hear in what tongue women speak,” (MacKinnon 1987, 45) But in the space between critique and utopia, we need a theory of justice to guide us. If the epistemological challenge of linking knowledge and objectivity reality is replaced in the social domain by the challenge of linking consciousness to social being, how do we meet that challenge?

References


