PCMA

WORKING PAPER SERIES

THE CONNECTEDNESS OF IVORY TOWERS AND INNER CITIES CONVERSATIONS ABOUT US AND THEM

By Sharon E. Sutton, James E. Crowfoot,
Mark Chesler, Edith Lewis, and Helen Weingarten

THE PROGRAM ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

The Program on Conflict Management Alternatives was established in January, 1986 by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and additional funds from the University of Michigan. These basic grants were renewed in July, 1988 and again in July, 1991. The Program supports an agenda of research, application, and theory development. PCMA also establishes links among other university research and teaching efforts relevant to conflict management alternatives, and maintains liaison and collaboration with similar efforts in other Universities and Practitioner agencies. The Program staffers own work focuses explicitly on the relationship between social justice and social conflict, specifically: (a) the use of innovative settlement procedures and roles for disputants and third parties; (b) the institutionalization of innovative mechanisms and the adoption of organizational and community structures that permanently alter the way conflicts are managed; and (c) the fundamental differences and inequalities between parties that often create conflict and threaten its stable resolution.

We examine these issues primarily in United States' settings, in conflicts arising within and between families, organizations and communities, and between different racial, gender, and economic constituencies. These specific efforts are supported by a variety of research and action grants/contracts with governmental agencies, foundations, and private and public organizations/agencies.

The Program in Conflict Management Alternatives is housed within the Center for Research on Social Organization, College of Literature, Science and the Arts, Room 4016 LS&A Building, Telephone: (313) 763-0472.

Core Members of the Program

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Frances Aparicio, Co-Director, PCMA and Associate Professor of Spanish & American Culture
Percy Bates, Director, PEO, Professor of Education
Barry Checkoway, Professor of Social Work
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Sharon Sutton, Associate Professor of Architeture
Helen Weingarten, Associate Professor, School of Social Work
Ximena Zuniga, Program Director, Intergroup Relations & Conflict

The Connectedness of Ivory Towers and Inner Cities
Conversations about Us and Them

by Sharon E. Sutton, James E. Crowfoot, Mark Chesler, Edith Lewis, Helen Weingarten

As Paulo Freire shows so well . . , the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us and which knows only the oppressor's tactics, the oppressor's relationships (Lorde as sited in Andersen and Hill-Collins, 1984, p. 502).

"L.A. Riots '92" flashed continuously across millions of TV screens—the blazing images that accompanied its words seared into the nation's collective memory and breached the calm in academia that usually follows spring graduation and the exodus of students from college campuses across the country. As various leaders scrambled to explain and respond to the most violent civil disturbance in the United States since the Irish poor burned Manhattan in 1863, a group of faculty at the University of Michigan met in the safety of a conference room to debate the parameters of meaningful change in the nation's impoverished urban areas. In particular, we were interested in the implications of social change in our own work. Doubtful that a magical redevelopment program would be invented to enable "them" to escape the rage of poverty, doubtful that a bigger pie would be crafted to free "us" from needing to share our abundance, the group agreed that critical change in the inner cities is tied to comparable transformation in the ivory towers and other places of privilege. Any analysis of the urban issue would necessarily involve reflection on our own personal and professional lives.

During a year-long seminar series entitled *Cities, Class, and Conflict*, this group (called the Program on Conflict Management Alternatives or PCMA) decided to take a critical look at the urban crisis in relation to the ways that we ordinarily conduct our affairs as scholars. We looked at how traditional substantive work can beneficially illuminate social problems, but we also attempted to understand how our positions of power are embedded in that work and seriously limit its usefulness. In particular, we struggled to understand our own complicity—however unintentional—in perpetuating such crises as the L.A. rebellion. Thus the following story is not

only about the urban crisis but rather it encompasses as data those cultural and social relationships that are reflected in our own group—in our perceptions, attitudes, and actions. However, it is not solely about PCMA. This story is about everyone who is a participant in U.S. society with its ongoing class struggles and urban crises including all those activists, academics, and establishment decision-makers who are seeking to find the alternatives ways of thinking and acting that might result in a more just society.

Through an examination our own values and behavior, PCMA hoped to gain an introspective understanding of the racially-based economic disenfranchisement of central-city residents as well as the role of race and class in the overbuilding or abandonment of certain cities. Regarding urban degradation as a serious threat to the democratic governance of the country, members felt some urgency to clarify the limitations of our own teaching and research; to find a means of making the knowledge that is available in the university more accessible to urban community groups; and to figure out how we, as activist faculty, might be more potent in addressing the extreme economic dualities that are apparent in the nation's metropolises. Recognizing the limitations of monocultural, discipline-based scholarship to forming a wholistic understanding of social problems, this racially diverse, multidisciplinary group of women and men were committed to exploring diverse knowledge bases and styles of inquiry. During twelve seminar sessions that included dialogue with resource persons both inside and outside of PCMA, we intertwined reflection on our autobiographies, formal presentations, and a variety of experiential activities comprising literary readings, dance, collage, visual imagery, and a site visit to a community-based organization.

Accepting that each person might participate in different ways, the goals of the seminar were that the group would (1) approach the subject matter in a multitude of ways; (2)probe the interdependence of privilege and poverty; and (3)elaborate a process of working together that was respectful of our differences in race, gender, and disciplinary orientation. As a result of the seminar, the group hoped that individuals would be more competent to actively promote social

change, whether in the university or in the community at large. These intentions reflected the diverse approaches to research, teaching, and professional practice that individuals brought to the group—approaches that were alternatively described as feminist, activist, reflective, or culturally-competent. Cutting across these varied ways of working was a shared belief that the group's investigation of urban phenomena should not be an end unto itself, but rather should be linked to action. As this paper will illustrate, *what* constitutes activist scholarship and teaching as well as *where* that activism should take place were central issues with which the group struggled throughout the year.

The decision to write a synopsis of the seminar came about during the final session as participants attempted to summarize our year's learning experiences and view them from a critical perspective. In previous years, synopses had been written by the group's research associate. However the 1992-1993 seminar cofacilitators believed that, through collaborative writing, a subgroup could push the knowledge that had been generated in the seminar to a more refined level, and welcomed all those interested to join us[1]. As this subgroup met and began to reconstruct the issues addressed in the seminar, they in effect held a secondary seminar. Thus this paper presents a synthesis and critique of the first seminar by five of its twelve faculty participants (whose collective perceptions, needless to say, are not necessarily reflective of the total group). More importantly, it sketches a sequel to the seminar in which five persons framed, and reframed, the meaning and content of what went on during the year through our own struggle with a collaborative writing process.[2] As a result of this effort, the authors gained important insights into

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[1] The subgroup volunteers are representative of PCMA's diversity in race, gender, and disciplinary orientation—an issue that is typically given consideration when various individuals in the total group decide to work together on special projects.

[2] The writing methodology comprised establishing a theoretical framework based on "ways of knowing;" using seminar transcripts to analyze each seminar along five dimensions (inquiry mode, processes and activities, context, type of involvement, and substance relative to class); identifying themes and subject areas contained in the analyses; preparing text for the latter by individual members of the writing group; and coordinating of these individual essays into a paper by one person. Drafts were reviewed by the writing group as well as three other PCMA members and critiqued by the entire PCMA group during a seminar session the following year.

the contributions that PCMA might make to the broader academic community that were apart from the learning that occurred during the actual seminar.

Since the seminar used the group itself as data, writing this paper posed a major ethical dilemma. In effect, the authors set out to communicate in a public format something about the collective identity of a specific group of persons—human subjects—who can not be anonymous or protected by the rules of confidentiality, as is normally the case in scientific inquiry. Even though we will continue to emphasize throughout the text that what is written here is the authors' slice on reality, we are painfully aware that putting our "truth" into words gives it validity as a bona fide representation of PCMA. We also are aware that our story, which is highly personal and revealing, may put our colleagues in a distressing and vulnerable position, especially those who disagree with our interpretationc of the seminar. Despite this dilemma, the authors are willing to assume the risk of sharing the important lessons that were learned during this rather messy process.

The paper begins with a section on the context in which the primary seminar took place. It encompasses a history of PCMA that shows how the methodology employed during the sessions fit with the evolution of the organization. It also includes a historical overview of the urban situation to indicate the dilemmas that we face as privileged university faculty in searching for meaningful remedies to social injustice. A second section presents the knowledge that was revealed and discovered as the group attempted to investigate the urban problem through diverse lenses. In this part of the paper, the authors discuss the conflicts that we perceived in PCMA and in our own writing process as we endeavored to clarify individual perceptions of activist scholarship. A third section utilizes reflections on the authors' learning process to provide suggestions for how academics can use their positions of power to work for change in the nation's inner cities.

The Context of a Seminar on Urban Inequality

Organizational History and the Shaping of a Methodology

PCMA is an academic enterprise that began its official life at the University of Michigan in 1986 after receiving a two-year grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for the purpose of generating advanced theory and practice in the field of social conflict and dispute resolution. Foundation staff, who were familiar with the work of several professors at the university, had recommended our collaboration on a funding proposal. This suggestion was appealing not only because of these faculty's mutual respect for one another's work but because of our shared commitment to promoting scholarship across differences in age, gender, race, professorial rank, and departmental affiliation. For two years prior to being funded, an expanded team of colleagues from different campus units met to discuss whether our varied approaches to applied social science could be combined to advance an understanding of the processes of conflict and social change. By the 1992-1993 academic year, PCMA had grown to include six female and six male core faculty members among whom were tenured and nontenured African Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews. This group represented ten different disciplines and held appointments in seven of the university's seventeen schools and colleges.

In accordance with the goals and objectives of the Hewlett Foundation, PCMA's mission centers around developing and disseminating theories and methods of conflict resolution. Current activities encompass a yearly seminar series (such as the one described in this paper), research and teaching, field work, occasional retrieval conferences, a program of small grants, and publications in numerous scholarly and popular arenas. Besides the group's ongoing activities, PCMA has collaborated with and jointly sponsored projects initiated by subgroups of our membership, some of which have become free-standing university groups, parts of other university units, or projects within community or professional organizations.

All these activities are guided by the founding faculty's vision of a joint venture in which working relationships and interpersonal dynamics would be an intended part of our substantive investigation of social change, conflict management, and social justice. Through a collaborative system of governance, members would seek to challenge the hierarchies, racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia that pervade most working relationships in the university (including within our membership). Central to our endeavors would be a struggle to move from simply being a diverse community toward becoming a truly multicultural organization. Ideally the group would serve as a laboratory in which to experiment with ways of dealing with difference and conflict in a variety of other settings. In exploring the links among social structure, social justice, and conflict resolution, PCMA would seek new settlement procedures as well as new roles for disputants and third parties; look for innovative institutional structures and inclusive cultures that could alter the way conflicts are perceived and managed; and examine the fundamental differences and inequities between disputing parties that threaten just and stable resolutions.

The particular seminar series that is described in this paper continued PCMA's efforts to include a critique of our own functioning in the exploration of conflict, social equity, and change; and it was in this context that some of the sessions focused on an examination of ourselves and our group while others centered around theoretical or action-oriented issues.

A Historical Overview of Urban Inequality

The bias of academic analysis is to dissect a phenomenon into ever smaller pieces and to understand those pieces through discipline-based or otherwise specialized expertise. Because positivism claims to be neutral and to resist acknowledging the partiality and interest-group biases of given methods, traditional scholarship tends not to deal with the dynamics of oppression that is the focus of PCMA's work. However in recent years the scientific method with its reliance on objectivity, detachment, and abstraction has been increasingly faulted as being unsuited to an integrated understanding of the modern world. Critics claim that the growing complexity of social and environmental problems calls for more wholistic methods of investigation, yet such

approaches frequently are characterized by empiricists as ideological and not scholarly, impressionistic and not factual, or overly simplistic and inadequate as the basis of informed policy-making. Risking such criticism, the authors of this paper have attempted to outline the history of urban inequality with a specific focus on the classism, racism, and systems of power that have impacted the evolution of cities.

In addition to the nation's roots in racial conquest and slavery, we propose that the underpinnings of the current urban crisis began to take shape after World War I with the progressive loss of decentralized self-governing communities to "the powerful national economic interests of the corporations, banks, and our investors" (Bellah et al., 1985, p. 43).

> *The Gilded Age was the era of the spectacular "self-made" economic success: captains of industry who could ignore the clamor of public opinion and rise to truly national power and prestige by economic means alone. In the predatory capitalists the age dubbed robber barons, some of the worst fears of earlier republican moralists seemed confirmed: that by releasing the untrammeled pursuit of wealth without regard to the demands of social justice, industrial capitalism was destroying the fabric of a democratic society, threatening social chaos by pitting class against class* (ibid.).

During this era, about 30 percent of all working adults were independent entrepreneurs (farmers, artisans, professional people), and the country's abundant acreage belonged to a broad segment of the population, half of whom lived in rural areas. African Americans, who were concentrated in the rural south, owned about one percent of the land. The mobility created by the open frontier and immigration, availability of property in a continent consisting of almost four million square miles, and a cultural ideology of individualism fueled the development of transportation, communication, and nation's love affair with the automobile (at that time, car makers in Southeastern Michigan were producing one car per 13 people).

After World War II, construction of interstate highways helped to strengthen suburban-based industry and solidify the geographic distribution of the races. Approximately 43 percent of all Negroes were drawn to older cities to supply the unskilled labor required by industrialists as whites moved out to populate about 94 percent of newly-built suburbs. In fact, suburbs surrounding a city like Detroit were almost entirely white.

[In 1954] the government financed construction of a huge freeway network. And the Federal Housing Administration insured loans for new suburban homes while often redlining older areas in the central city.

The freeway system provided a funnel for suburban immigration. Manufacturing plants relocated to suburban industrial corridors. Commercial establishments flocked to suburban shopping malls. Warehouse facilities left lofts at points of central-city convergence for single-story buildings at points of suburban interstate freeway convergence (Darden et al., 1987, pp. 16-17).

By 1970, three years before the global transformations brought on by the Arab Oil Embargo, a radically different economic structure was in place in the United States in which 90 percent of all workers were salaried with women comprising a major component of the work force. Agribusiness supplanted the family farm, large factories overshadowed small workshops, bureaucratic regulations substituted for traditional relationships governed by community norms—and the proportion of privately-owned land decreased. While workers derived the majority of their income from salaries, the elite derived almost 95 percent of their income from landholdings with those leasing property to the corporate sector realizing the highest rate of return (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, pp. 90-91). Fear of crime, desegregation, and a continued infatuation with the automobile (one car per two persons constituted a 10-fold increase in fifty years), fueled suburban development. As the middle-class moved to suburbia and HUD secretary George Romney cut federal grants to cities (where approximately 58 percent of all black people lived); urban blight, school dropout, and joblessness began to surge along with a range of criminal behaviors.

Prior to the Oil Embargo, the potential for unlimited development of physical resources and the nation's preeminent position in the international economic system had engendered uncommon opportunities for upward mobility, particularly among white middle- and upper-class males. Through their positions of authority and power in the economic, political, and social systems, they could control the nature and direction of growth to serve their best interests. However, even for women and minorities, there was little motivation to question the sageness of giving up geographically dispersed, independent, small-scale, land-based activities to the efficiencies (and

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apparent economies) of big business since there were so many examples of poor people who had worked their way into the middle or even upper classes.

However by 1980, the nation was paying an increasingly high cost for unbridled growth and was preparing to go deeper into debt to continue this pattern. As property became more concentrated in the hands of investors (in 1982 only 58.7 percent of the land belonged to private individuals and, by 1985, the holdings of blacks had plummeted to three-tenths percent), some cities were literally abandoned while others became high-powered financial centers for multinational corporations that were flanked by teeming ghettos and barrios. By 1985, 43 percent of poor people lived in central cities, up from 27 percent in 1959, often in overcrowded neighborhoods with high rates of unemployment, substandard housing, and the absence of transportation to suburban jobs (Goldsmith and Blakely, 1992).

In 1991, violence among youth reached an all time high—there was one chance in 10,000 of being murdered that year (a rate that was far higher among young black males); white-collar workers comprised forty percent of the newly unemployed; one in four children lived in poverty; homelessness was an accepted fact of life; and housing prices continued to increase almost 40 percent yearly. While those at the top of the corporate ladder garnered increasing profits, developers were converting 12-square-miles of farmland a day into roads, shopping centers, housing developments, and factories—an area in the last decade that equals Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Delaware combined (Wachtel, 1989, p. 49) while many urban areas were left in decay.

Thus in less than a century, there has been a rapid transition in the United States from a land-based entrepreneurial economy to an urban-based and highly-mobile corporate one. Large business empires have created economic monopolies while major universities and professional associations have tightened their control over access to certain "scientific" occupations. Through steep educational barriers, each occupation has succeeded "in carving out an occupational monopoly restricted to the elite minority who could afford college educations and graduate

degrees" (Ehrenreich, 1990, p. 80). At the same time, those individuals who were unable to access these economic and occupational strangleholds have been increasingly stripped of the possibility to be self-supporting. Their enforced dependence on charity serves to diminish the sense of connection to home and community that everyone needs but that is utterly essential to those who are disenfranchised from the perks of mainstream culture. In a novel by Traven (1979), a fictional character who is interceding in the unwilling sale of a Mexican hacienda aptly summarized what happens when poor people lose their land to corporate interests.

> *Keep your hands off Rosa Blanca [a native-owned hacienda]. It would be a shame if it were broken up and converted into a stinking noisy oil field. I was there recently. It's a jewel. And real men [sic] are living there. They are splendid fellows now but they'll become bandits and robbers if Rosa Blanca is taken away from them. We have plenty of cases like this. Who do you think all these bandits and train robbers we find around the country are? They're people who have lost a Rosa Blanca and no longer know what to do with themselves. They end up rotting away in the cities and degenerate into thieves, stealing and murdering as the easiest way to keep themselves alive (p. 143).*

As faculty—faculty whose employer is a major landowner and political force in a racially and economically segregated suburban environment, who spur the mania of growth by pursuing research that stimulates the economy, who magnify class distinctions by offering increasingly higher levels of education as prerequisites for economic advancement, who promote individualistic competition and hierarchical relationships, who are part of a powerful organization that benefits from more research dollars than any other public university—is it possible for PCMA members to help recreate the Rosa Blancas and other options for self-determination. Can we assist poor people to have control over their economic well-being without undoing the foundations of our own livelihood? Can we encourage the unpaving of paved-over farmlands without loosing some of those students who pay our salaries? Can we help to restore lost communities and undo those political and economic structures that perpetuate inequity without diminishing our superior status as faculty? These were the central dilemmas that reappeared throughout the seminar as will be apparent in the next section.

Four Ways of Knowing
A Framework for Conceptualizing the Seminar

To create an organizational framework for this paper, the authors conceptualized the seminar content according to four distinct ways of communicating, which we will refer to as *ways of knowing,*. This particular framework appealed to us because of our commitment to relinquishing the corner on knowledge that academics typically create for themselves by using, or excluding, particular styles of human expression. In this section, we have organized the themes that surfaced in the seminar accordingly as theorizing, self-reflecting, group processing, and action-taking. Theorizing includes the group's dialogue on the nature of inequality and privilege as well as an exploration of spirituality as a possible tool for social change. Self-reflecting comprises individual disclosures and discussions of the role of personal class backgrounds in shaping various members' approaches to activist scholarship. Action-taking describes a variety of proposals as well as actual community-based projects that were initiated within and outside of the seminar. Group processing encompasses those debates that ensued about the way in which the group tended to validate our own knowledge while discounting alternative perspectives, and barriers to our ability to explore individuals' divergent perspectives on social justice.

Figure 1 illustrates these four ways of knowing and suggests the conflicts and discomforts that occurred as seminar discussions took on these various forms. In reflecting on these disputes, the authors of this paper believe that participants' differing disciplinary, sociopolitical, and sociocultural perspectives played a role. For example, it seemed to us that one area of conflict arose because some participants felt more comfortable learning in nontraditional styles while others seemed to posit greater confidence in traditional methods. Another instance was due to certain members perceiving that others were engaging in exclusionary behavior that discounted the very real differences that existed within the group. Finally, there were conflicting reactions to the seminar itself. Those persons who were more accepting of university norms appeared to

characterize the discussions as too "touchy-feely" for what is expected of academics while those who were more resisting of university norms seemed to react to the seminar as being too self-indulgent to effectively address social change.

Table 1 indicates the way(s) of knowing that the authors of this paper assigned to each of the seminar discussions. It also indicates our perceptions of where conflicts occurred during various sessions as one way of knowing was emphasized while another way of knowing was ignored or even violated. Finally the table lists several spin-off activities, indicating the variety of individual and collective endeavors that took place outside of the seminar but also served to inform it. In the following section, we will present a synthesis of the seminar dialogue organized according to these four ways of knowing along with the authors' reflections on what knowledge was derived through these various methods.
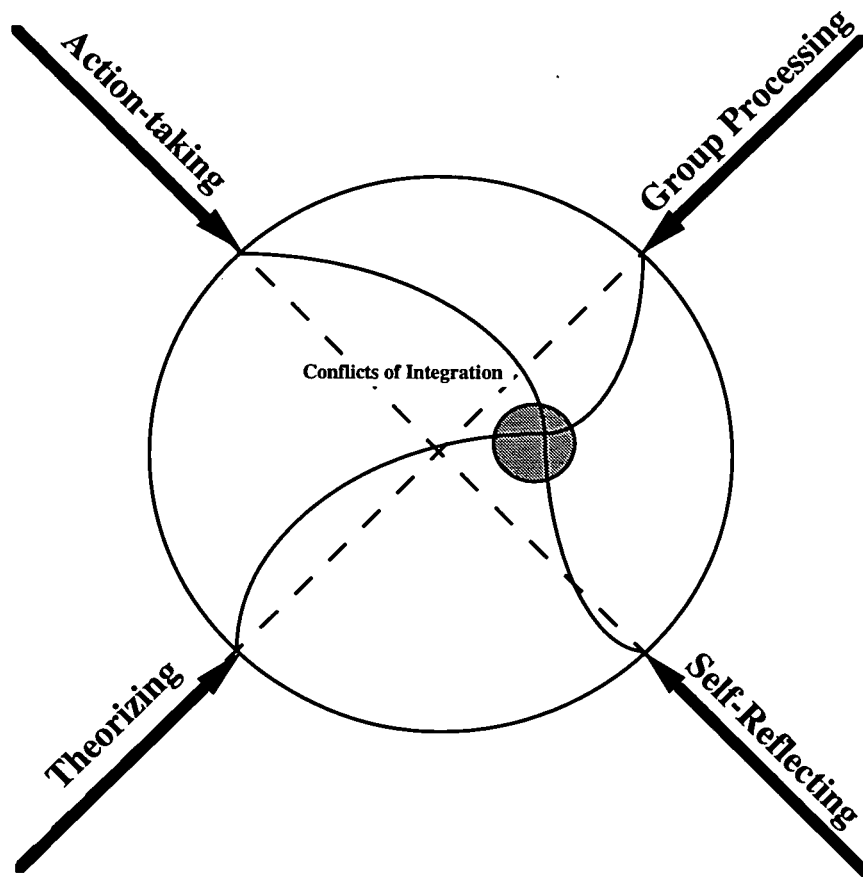

Figure 1: The Conflicts of Integrating Diverse Ways of Knowing

Seminar Title / Spin-off from Seminar	Way of Knowing Assigned to Discussion			
	Action-taking	Self-Reflecting	Group-Processing	Theorizing
Race and Inequality: What is the Problem and How Can PCMA Make a Difference?			###	XXX
PCMA's Social Class Autobiographies		XXX		
The Urban Underclass (Guest Speaker: ???)				
Bringing the Voices of Urban Dwellers to the Table		XXX	√√	###
Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege (Guest Speaker: Peggy McIntosh)				XXX
Debriefing: What Has Happened? What is Missing?		XXX	XXX	
Assistance to a Local Family	XXX Actual			
Site Visit to a Residential Substance Abuse Treatment Program: A Microcosm of Inner-City Life	XXX Actual		###	
Addressing Social Change as an Individual, as a Faculty Member, and as an Organization	√√ Proposal ###	XXX	XXX	
Using Visual Imagery to Reconstruct Memories of Gender, Race, and Class		XXX	XXX	
Spirituality and Social Action		XXX	###	XXX
Consultations with a Local Crisis Center	XXX Actual			
Music as an Instrument of Social Change			XXX	√√
Participatory Action Research in Los Angeles (Guest Speaker: ???)	√√ Proposal			XXX
Retrieval: Summarize the Most Salient Urban Issues, Conflicts Experienced, Individual Learnings, and Unanswered Questions		XXX	XXX	XXX
Memorandum on Alternative Roles for PCMA in Social Change	√√ Proposal ###			√√

Key
XXX   Primary Way of Knowing
√√   Secondary Way of Knowing
Areas of Conflict

Table 1: Ways of Knowing in the Seminar and Its Spin-off Activities

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Knowing as Theory: How to Understand and Dismantle Privilege

The discussions that embodied theorizing about the urban crisis concerned the necessity for understanding the urban crisis relative to our own privilege, a compelling theme that surfaced during our very first session when we viewed a set of visual images that juxtaposed scenes of decay with ones of affluence. Related to this motif was a discussion of spirituality as a means for understanding our connectedness to other people and to the Earth.

Inequality and Its Relation to Our Own Privilege

> *How difficult it is to make audible the voice of oppression in a choir where privilege controls the resources and accepted tonalities of seeing, knowing, and being. Privilege can make choices and assure that these choices are possible within existing institutional frameworks. Privilege is free of the need to constantly improvise and get others to attend to a more inclusive view of history. Oppression, on the other hand, is so consumed by the realities of exclusion that it has little energy left to create its own truth or vision of the future. Oppression must use its left hand to pound away at a commitment to somehow eradicate social injustice while, at the same time, use its right hand to leap octaves and gain acceptance into the very institutions that are creating injustice* (Sutton, 1992, p. 12).

What concerned PCMA members was how to utilize our positions in a privileged institution to participate in social change. Since the ethics of social justice and responsibility would seem to put activist scholars in a triple bind. To enhance the lives of the less privileged while maintaining our own social status, activist scholars must share with those who have less while being accountable to persons who have more. At the same time, we must avoid our own downward mobility. Like all subordinate groups, our continued existence requires that we obtain support from more powerful institutions by convincing these organizations (whose interests and values may only partially overlap or be quite different from our own) that we will be responsive to their concerns. Being simultaneously accountable to the interests of the powerful *and* the oppressed, activist scholars may find ourselves working to support the very values that we are seeking to change.

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Two feminist writers, Meyerson and Scully (1993) described persons who simultaneously embrace such contradictory roles as "tempered radicals"—persons who precariously "maintain dual identities and commitments" (p. 11) to work within a system while, at the same time, trying to change it. Ambivalence over privilege may have been at the heart of many of the conflicts that PCMA experienced, our privilege and the desire to maintain it seeming to betray our commitment to augment social justice for disenfranchised peoples. In attempting to define the parameters of social change, we began to recognize the importance of unraveling our own pathologies as members of the overclass. Despite the fact that the underclass and other disadvantaged groups receive much attention, it is the overclass who possess much of the power to change society and whose lifestyle imposes hardships on disadvantaged persons. Many of the overclass who have abandoned urban areas reap benefits from a distant association with them, including those suburban buyers who support central-city drug economies, suburban property owners who profit from slum housing, and suburban commuters who hold urban jobs or attend cultural events but avoid being taxed for the maintenance of its infrastructures. Refocusing on the difficulties that we ourselves create as members of the overclass would help us to lay bare the nature of their privileges, and those of our families, associates, and friends.

PCMA's oft-repeated discussion of our privileged status in society revealed some of the ways in which the overclass are able to remain unaware of and unconnected to class struggles and to the underclass. Rather than seeing the "other" for who they are and who we are with them, social distancing helps us to objectify the urban poor. We can thus obscure our own role in the reproduction of an oppressive class system even while being convinced that we are acting in a socially responsible manner.

Spirituality as a Framework for Social Change

Cities, Class and Conflict contained just one session on spirituality, but it stimulated the authors of this paper to probe the issue of inequality from this perspective. We recognized that

although the topic is rare in most social-science and secular-humanist discourse, it provides an important means of challenging materialistic definitions of reality. While acknowledging the tentativeness of the concepts presented, we share a conviction that spirituality can provide a uniquely valuable framework for understanding socioeconomic class and its antecedents, and for realizing a more equitable society.

Spiritual teachings, which reveal linkages within the self and between the self and the universe, are based on alternative modes of seeing, knowing, and being. Through spiritual practice, individuals are able to experience new insights and ways of behaving, notably the wherewithal to participate in social change. While a class-based conception of humanity serves to separate persons and link them to specific groups that are assumed to be autonomous (and divided), spirituality applauds the interconnectedness of life and is concerned with enabling individuals to find a sense of wholeness, union, and oneness. Through spirituality, individuals can perceive their connectedness—within themselves, with other individuals and groups, and with the largest mysteries of the cosmos. Being in harmony with a universally shared consciousness expands their vision of the world, and sparks the energy and openness to participate in change.

One way of conceptualizing the internal architecture of the self is provided by Bradshaw (1988) who placed the ego at the center of an individual's psyche, characterizing it as a narrowed consciousness through which an individual establishes a sociocultural identity. The ego self primarily is concerned with survival. Surrounding this core persona are shadowy parts of the personal unconscious that "have been toxically shamed and split off" (p. 218) by experiences of exploitation and oppression. The outer psyche, the paraconscious mind, senses the connectedness to others that enables individuals to transcend oppression (See Figure 2 for Bradshaw's depiction of this internal architecture).
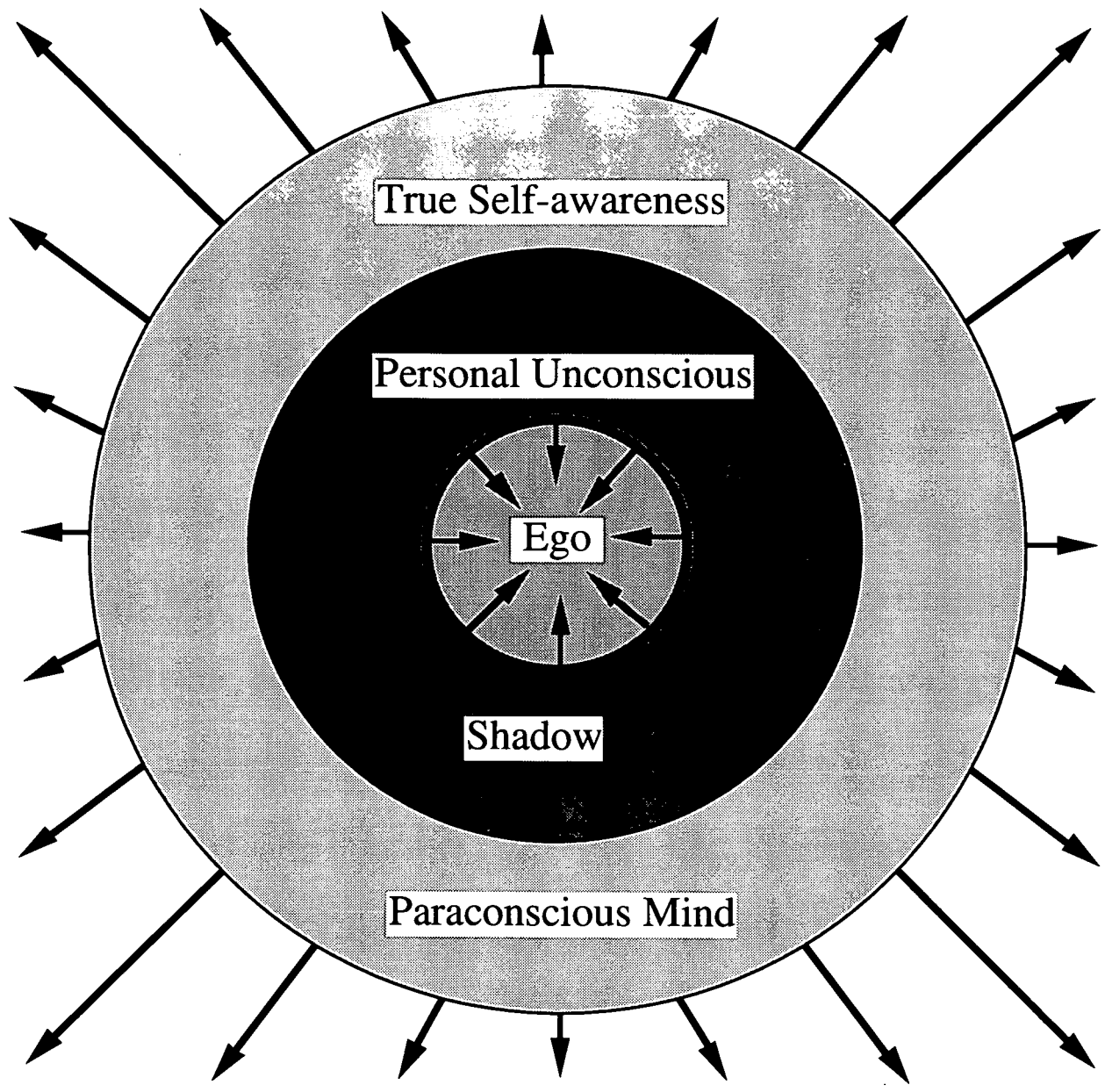
Source: Bradshaw (1988, p. 218)

Figure 2

Bradshaw's Depiction of the Internal Architecture of the Psyche

Spirituality emphasizes the integration of these three aspects of the self, fusing the survival instinct of the ego with the unconscious residue of past and present domination as well as with the self-aware psyche. Ideally, spiritual development helps to heal that part of the self that has been damaged by encounters with oppression and leads one to strive for sustainable relationships in

which neither persons, places, nor things are exploited. Such development does not deny the reality of oppression and its devastating impacts but rather contributes to interrupting these processes in the individual's perceptions, behaviors, and relationships.

While spiritual development negates single-mindedly pursuing material satisfaction in lieu of environmental conservation, human relatedness, and psychological well-being; social status is associated with the competitive acquisition of material goods. In a capitalistic culture like ours, elements in the physical and social environment are objectified, assigned values, and then bought and sold to the benefit of dominant groups. The commodification of essential resources creates differential access and contrasting wealth among the owners and users of those resources as illustrated by the appraising of certain urban and suburban properties so that the latter and its owners have high value while the former and its owners are deemed worthless. In many traditional cultures, the commodification of the physical and social environment for profit is unthinkable as expressed by Chief Joseph of the Nez Perces Nation:

> *The earth was created by the assistance of the sun and it should be left as it was. The country was made without lines of demarcation and it is no man's [sic] business to divide it. The earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same. . . . Understand me fully with reference to my affection for the land. I never said the land was mine to do with it as I chose. The one who has the right to dispose of it is the one who has created it.*

Individuals who seek to meet their basic human needs for food, shelter, and so forth solely through material goods often become addicted to the act of accumulation even though their belongings rarely bring happiness (Slater, 1980; Wachtel, 1989). When such a frantic effort to horde wealth combines with the power to control others, a variety of norms result to protect the addict's cache including the institutionalization of authority, power, and even violence. From this perspective, injustice is rooted, at least in part, in the aberrant effort to achieve a fulfilled life exclusively through material objects and in the personal and social hurts that result from such addictive behavior.

Our society's devotion to materialism affects our way of being (ontology) as well as our ways of knowing (epistemology) that are dominated by empiricism and positivist science. Logical positivism emphasizes that which is separable from the self, the whole of nature, and the cosmos; what exists is that which is observable, potentially measurable, and subject to control. It delineates sharp boundaries between seen and felt, normal and deviant, valued and worthless. Positivism authorizes individuals and groups to manipulate the physical and social environment for their own purposes—to fabricate a world view in which utilitarianism and materialistic addiction become the norm. In this way science is used to advance middle- and upper-class interests and to further exploitation by making aberrant alternative ways of being and knowing. Returning to Traven's (1979) novel, a description of the native Mexican who refuses to sell his hacienda epitomizes the participation of scientists in inventing deviance for material gain.

> *Jacinto would not have been the first person sent to an insane asylum to rot away and die there because an oil company couldn't get his property any other way. Dozens of Mexicans have been sent to institutions because they refused to sell. Obviously, anyone who refuses to sell his land for a price that is a thousand times higher than it was before oil was found in the vicinity is crazy* (p. 9).

One important difference between the practice of spirituality and institutionalized Christianity (the dominant religion in U.S. society) is that the latter somtimes involves dogma and established hierarchies of authority. While many people experience spiritual growth through Christian faith, its dogma serves to objectify spiritual practice by limiting direct communication with God through hierarchies of select persons who oversee the rules of normative behavior. Judeo-Christian teachings call for obedience to God's authority as represented by church officials and direct us to "fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28). In these respects, some Christian organizations are reflective of the classist, capitalist society in which we are embedded.[3] In contrast, many mystics and some spiritual groups believe that every person is at one with nature and, thus, are able to access directly the divine and contribute to a community's

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[3] In this respect, Christianity is quite distinct from the teachings of Islam that is guided by the principles of *Ummah* which specify equality, lack of class separation, and direct communication with Allah.

definition of authority. Although teachers are desirable, they do not replace direct spiritual experience.

The writers of this paper believe that spirituality is a powerful tool for activist scholarship because it challenges materialism and the prevailing understandings of human nature that make Jacinto into a lunatic. Spirituality lends legitimacy to those voices that have been marginalized and enlarges an individual's reality by connecting it to the cosmos. By seeing ourselves as part of an interconnected universe, we members of the overclass can begin to assume greater responsibility for our role as oppressors. Yet we would warn that while spirituality is an important window on society's dominant paradigms, it too can be distorted so as to deny or legitimate the extreme material suffering and human violence that are occurring throughout the world. It also can be trivialized when advocated as a means of change without a real acknowledgement of the need to redress disparities in power and resources, or to further develop and redistribute the wherewithal to satisfy basic human needs.

Knowing as Self-reflection: What Is Our Relationship to Poverty?

The only devils in the world are those running around in our own hearts and that is where all our battles ought to be fought. Gandhi

Because the founding members of PCMA accepted personal experience as a valid and essential source for understanding a given phenomenon (McGoldrick, 1982; Lewis, 1993), we had attempted to balance self-examination and understanding with substantive investigations of various social phenomena throughout the group's history.[4] However in this particular seminar series, the need for self-examination emerged as a dominant issue comprising discussions of individual class backgrounds and their role in shaping each person's approach to activism. The authors categorized seven of the sixteen sessions according to this mode of inquiry including three highly emotional

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[4] Although the authors of this chapter are describing as ideal a balance between looking outward at cities and inward at ourselves, the value of this dual perspective only became clear during the writing process. During the actual seminar, the goal was one of being experimental in designing seminar formats; and clearly some PCMA members were more comfortable with outward-looking formats than with inward-looking ones and vice versa.

meetings. One of these three sessions involved the group in telling our own social class autobiographies; another engaged participants in reading aloud statements by or about impoverished persons; and the third involved us in collaging together photographs from our childhoods. As will be apparent in this part of the paper, the intensity of our emphasis on self-reflection led to equally heated debates over the validity of this form of inquiry. We will begin the next portion of the paper with the group's working definition of class, and then evaluate PCMA's success in challenging classism. We will end by describing the tensions that arose in trying to utilize self-reflection as a viable scholarly enterprise.

Conceptualizing Class and Its Impact on Our Work

Class is more than income or wealth. It is a combination of financial and social status as well as access, cultural style, and political power. While class had conditioned our lives and predisposed us to elevate certain experiences over others, it had not inexorably determined anyone's future because mobility had occurred with the group, both upward and downward. Our individual reflections on class revealed that some of us felt in our parents or upbringing a kind of class strain that resulted from having higher social than economic status due to our occupational, religious, ethnic, or cultural position. This strain was reflected in feeling "better than" others regardless of financial resources. Members also discovered that our present experience of class was affected not only by our own status but by the position of our parents, grandparents, and extended families which served to create disparate views of class within the group.

Since race, class, and gender are not additive but rather are interactive attributes that shape individual and group experience (Andersen and Hill-Collins,1992), tensions emerged between seminar participants' individual identities (including the extent to which persons accepted the premise of being contributors to oppressive situations) and our perceived roles in the academy. Additionally, there were differences in the relevance of class to each person's scholarship. Since class, by definition, characterizes the aggregate, those participants whose work was concerned

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with the individual seem to feel more conflicted about the appropriate arena of activist scholarship than those whose work targeted organizations or communities. For the psychologist or humanist, having a micro-level impact included our teaching and publications; for the participants whose work dealt with macro-level phenomena, assisting social units to lessen inequity and oppression was of major importance. Thus, the relative influence of our different class situations and career foci impinged in varied ways on the values and norms that overlaid each person's activism.

One method the authors of this paper used to assess PCMA's efforts relative to classist attitudes and behaviors were the following recommendations put forth by Langston:

1. *Confront classist behavior in yourself, others, and society. Use and share the privileges, like time or money, which you do have.*

2. *Make demands on working-class and poor communities' issues—anti-racism, poverty, unions, public housing, public transportation, literacy, and day care.*

3. *Learn from the skills and strengths of working people—study working and poor people's history, take some Labor Studies, Ethnic Studies, Women Studies classes. Challenge elitism. There are many different types of intelligence: white middle-class, academic, professional intellectualism being one of them (reportedly). Finally, educate yourself, take responsibility, and take action* (As cited in Anderson and Hill-Collins, 1988, p. 119).

We believe that the scholarship and behavior of most PCMA members meets the first recommendation and demonstrates our capacity to share privileges. For example, we engage in probono training in local community organizations, provide funding for mini community projects, and donate money to needy persons. Our consultations with community organizations, K-12 schools, churches, and higher educational institutions illustrate our diligence in attending to social injustices. However, the authors of this paper felt that members have not addressed adequately our divergent personal class backgrounds or our role in perpetuating class differences when working as external experts in the local community.

In attempting to understand how to educate ourselves on the issues of working and poor people as major class divisions bring about struggles within and across racial and ethnic groups, PCMA recognized the importance of not always linking oppressed racial status with lower class or

with urban. Great and moderate wealth exists in urban areas and cities themselves have varying

ranks within the national and international economic system. Unprecedented population growth,

economic globalization, and urbanization are taking place worldwide, especially in the so-called

developing countries of the Southern hemisphere where many people live in abject poverty next

door to enormous wealth. Thus, the coexistence of unmet basic human needs and almost

unimaginable affluence are an important characteristic of cities.

However given the higher unemployment rate of African-American males living in U.S.

cities as compared to their white counterparts with equal education (Goldsmith and Blakely, p. 42)

and the concentration of grinding urban poverty among people of color worldwide, our tendency to

link race, class, and urban is understandable—a linkage that was experienced by participants while

reading the following inner-city poem:

> *¿de donde vine?*
> *pues del barrio, como tu*
> *dime, cual Chicano no ha nacido ahi*
> *¿cual Chicano no sabe de esa vida?*
>
> *No me cuentes del barrio tuyo*
> *porgue el mio fue igual:*
> *el tuyo y el mio*
> *es el mismo barrio*
> *aunque el mio está por allá en el destierro*
> *y el tuyo mas acá.*
> *¿Qué no sabes, carnalito,*
> *que dondequiera que vive un Chicano*
> *allí hay tambien un barrio?*

> *Where am I from?*
> *Why from the barrio, like you*
> *tell me, which Chicano was not born there*
> *which Chicano doesn't know that life?*
>
> *Don't tell me about your barrio*
> *for mine was the same:*
> *yours and mine*
> *are the same barrio*
> *though mine is over there in the diaspora*
> *and yours over here*
> *Don't you know, kinsman,*
> *that wherever a Chicano lives*
> *there too is a barrio?*
> (Gasca, 19??, p. 38)

PCMA members were cognizant of being in a suburban, affluent, and privileged community (even though there are class inequities in Ann Arbor and in other areas of the county) and in a university that is seen as being unresponsive to surrounding central-city problems. Some members perceived our individual efforts to redress urban issues as acceptable; others experienced frustration, or even guilt, at the university's isolation from poverty and activism.

Struggling with Self-reflection as a Valid Means of Inquiry

> *Certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation, thus moving from one pole of the contradiction to the other . . . . It happens, however, that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know . . . Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly . . . . Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were (Freire, 1970, p. 46-47).*

PCMA's double-edged interest in understanding the urban problem intellectually and viscerally meant that we had to understand our own privilege, isolation, and distance from the problem as well as our role in maintaining social inequities. As a result of a discussion early in the semester on the underclass that seemed to objectify that group, members began to struggle with the concept of the overclass and with our own superior status. Consequently during a review session at midterm some participants expressed their concern that the seminar was more about personal history than it was about the city. As the year progressed, the group continued to debate the degree to which the seminar should focus on personal class backgrounds and privilege, on the problems of poor people in cities, or on an integration of both. Individuals had distinct preferences as well as disparate understandings of the viability of each of these options as the following excerpts from seminar transcriptions illustrate:

Speaker 1
I think we find the city intractable. It's remarkable how little we've done, talking about the city. I mean that was the topic of discussion, and yet we've spent time on personal histories and how we're relating to this stuff and we haven't tackled the topic at all. . . . I don't think we've described it. I don't think we've identified the causes. I don't think we've started on what potential solutions might be and how one can use one's own privileged position to start to bring about change. . . . The problem I have is that somehow

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we get to all these big social problems but somehow we always end up talking about ourselves.

Speaker 2
You're doing the "them" or "us". I mean in a way that's what you're saying. We need to help them, but we're not part of it. Now we are dealing with our own privilege, but I think we are as connected to the them out there who are underprivileged—there is a direct correlation. I think we need to dismantle our own spaces.

There also was ambivalence about the topic since participants had varying knowledge, interests, and disciplinary approaches to cities. For one person, the subject matter was new ("I find understanding what's going on in the city so far beyond what I know and understand that I sure could use some help to do that"). For others, it was their career focus ("I've had an ambivalent relationship to these questions that use urban—cities—this semester because my career commitment has been there"). During one session toward the beginning of the year, the strain of this diversity of perspectives was exacerbated when a guest scholar presented research in a more academic manner. In reflecting on that session, one participant wrote:

> I was intensely concentrating, thinking about the presented area of social science knowledge (not a familiar one to me) and seeking to understand the ideas presented and move to critiquing these ideas. The presenter was an academic expert on the topic who had clearly reviewed the relevant social science research literature and able to critically synthesize it and I wanted to "pick his brain." My head was engaged, emotionally I felt I wanted to show I understood the presentation, and competitively speaking that I could raise interesting, challenging questions.

The need for getting a handle on the established social science literature and for finding a way of becoming informed on a complex issue overshadowed attention to group process and inhibited participants' emotional response to the subject matter. Yet those sessions that engaged members in looking at poverty in a personally-involved manner were quite painful such as when participants read aloud about poverty to "let other people's voices get into the city experience—not the voices that we normally listen to or think about when we're putting together pieces for this seminar."

In that session as each person read an assigned piece, the intense quiet of listening was interrupted only by laughter or by the silence of wiping away tears. When the readings ended and

the facilitator asked the group to talk about the kinds of images the readings drew out, participants were unable to address the prompt. Rather, we began by describing the feeling of reading someone else's words and the risks associated with nonacademic approaches. Midstream, the discussion switched to talking about the academic style (and male dominance) of the previous session. Someone tried twice to return to the readings, but the level of emotional engagement proved uncomfortable.

> Speaker 1
> We just shared what for many of us were powerful things. But we're not talking about this week, we're talking about two weeks ago. There is this kind of funny difficulty with sticking with what's going on in some intense way.

> Speaker 2
> I think the theme too is very painful. I think for all of us talking about poverty is very painful, experiences of violence, domestic or whatever—I think its too painful. Perhaps our reflecting about last week is a way of thinking about how do we talk about poverty. Because it is just too painful we need to go back to the abstract and the intellectual.

The challenge of integrating substantive inquiry with self-reflection on a subject that was so complex—so grave and personally implicating—may have been the most unresolvable aspect of the seminar. However, the struggle itself was beneficial in expanding our awareness of how intellectual discourse can sharpen the sense of separateness between "us" and "them" thus blocking the possibility for meaningful social change both within and outside of the academy.

Knowing through Group Process: Why Our Laboratory Was Imperfect

As PCMA members endeavored to elaborate interventions into the urban crisis through a critique of its own group process, our capacity to value those voices that are generally excluded from academic discourse and to recognize differences within the group was called into question. These conflicts are presented below.

Trying to Relinquish Our Monopoly on Knowledge

What makes a legitimate voice? Who gets to be an expert? How are people's natural abilities devalued or compromised by professionals who create monopolies for their services? To

recognize the self-supporting capacities of central-city residents, PCMA expanded traditional concepts of expertise by listening to persons who are generally excluded from academia and by speaking in ways that counter norms for detached intellectual discourse. We wanted to avoid what Hill-Collins (1990, p. 203) has referred to as a "Eurocentric masculinist process" in which the taken-for-granted knowledge of white men is reinforced while those concepts that challenge the status quo are rendered less credible.

The group was sensitive to "the crucial issues involved when a member of a privileged group 'interprets' the reality of members of a less powerful, exploited, and repressed group" (hooks, 1990, p. 55). Similarly, we wanted to explore "the ways in which our academic world embraces multicultural theses put forth by Anglo scholars, while simultaneously rejecting analogous ones from their ethnic counterparts as too conflictive, too divisive, or perhaps too ethnocentric" (Aparicio, 1993, pp. 9-10). Like Collins, Aparicio maintained that the dominant group tends to validate those alternative voices that are more compatible with its own values.

> *In the latino/a context, Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa have become the icons of the new Latino writer nationally and internationally, yet very few people are even minimally aware of the diversity of Chicano/Latino cultural expressions and of the literary traditions from which and against which Anzaldúa and Cisneros have emerged. The hyper-valorization of these figures is based on Eurocentric literary values (p. 7).*

PCMA members wished to avoid denying the alternative views that are so frequently extinguished by reinforcing taken-for-granted knowledge and, at the same time, to explore those voices within ourselves that have been suppressed by academic norms. The group attempted to use the humanities innovatively, to apply personal experiences to the construction of particular variables, to broaden the types of "scholars" to whom we were exposed by drawing from sources outside the academy. We grappled with the need to be critical of how class differences influence the extent to which one has access to the type of knowledge that is deemed rigorous by the academy versus the type of knowledge that is spawned by so-called lower-status groups. We wrestled with the observation of feminists scholars such as Hill-Collins (1990) concerning women's, especially black women's, need "to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily

conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of a Black feminist consciousness " (p. 202).

Ideally we would have been able to access the skills and strengths of working people, and to divest ourselves of the type of exclusionary attitude that devalues the avenues of expressions that are available to lower-class persons, as Lorde (1984) noted:

> *Recently a women's magazine collective made the decision for one issue to print only prose, saying poetry was a less "rigorous" or "serious" art form. Yet even the form our creativity takes is often a class issue. Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper (p. 114).*

However the writing of this paper, which is clearly in an academic style and intended for other scholars, is an indication of the degree to which we seemed unable to let go of our own intellectual elitism. As we combined theoretical presentations by urban researchers with the less-accepted scholarship of music, dance, or inner-city poetry, as we discussed our family histories or collaged family-album photographs, we continued to fall into the trap of legitimating traditional roles while not credentialing other forms of expertise. Some members of the core faculty actually seemed to avoid those sessions that incorporated experiential activities and, as one participant noted, the group appeared to sanction objective knowledge while devaluing personal feelings and reactions, as the following excerpt from a seminar transcript suggests:

> This discussion reminds me of when we started the seminar the first day. At some point we zipped over to William Julius Wilson, and at some point we cut off people's emotional passion about the issue and returned to authority—that there were worthy answers that some academics had and that we were removed from those—that our personal experience had no place in those analyses. It's not like we don't want to read those books or hear about them, but there is a way of privileging that and demeaning everything else.

Not infrequently it was the women in PCMA who assumed leadership in integrating ways of knowing that are not traditionally valued in academic settings, thus risking the devalorization of our own voices. The issue that will be explored later in the paper is how such a risk within one's own community of privilege can be used creatively to unseat demeaning views of the talents of disenfranchised persons.

The Difficulty of Acknowledging Differences within Our Group

According to Glazer (1987), the United States was founded on the principle that persons could express their cultural backgrounds as long as their activities did not compromise what was considered to be normative middle- and upper-middle-class British behavior—behavior in which the subjugation of people of color, women, and lower socioeconomic groups was implicit. This principle created a milieu in which open expression of cultural differences was minimized while covert obsession with race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class differences was maximized.

The veiling of cultural difference as deviance is manifest throughout the history of this country, and is clearly evidenced in the underlying assumptions of those mainstream scholars and technocrats who inform social policy and public opinion. One early illustration is provided by the 1840 Census that ranked free African Americans living in the north prior to emancipation as ten times more likely to exhibit mental illness than their brothers and sisters enslaved in the south (Maultsby, 1982). More recent illustrations include Jensen's demonstration of the inferior intelligence of black youth; the racially-based sorting of students according to ability and through disciplinary actions; and the culture-of-poverty theory that resulted in dead-end job-training programs and the justification of harsh penal tactics. The fear of crime (presumably at the hands of low-income minorities) and desegregation of schools that spurred white flight to the suburbs document the general public's reactions to the deviancy model of difference.

One of seminar's unmet challenges was to openly explore its own internal differences as a diverse group of individuals who are working collaboratively on social justice, conflict management, and social change. Avoiding this issue of difference may have been due to our socialization into the academic community which has taught us to see ourselves as a homogeneous group of intellectuals who are removed from those outside the academy. Yet, we come from differing constituencies and hold divergent perspectives on PCMA's social justice agenda. The direction the seminar took opened an opportunity for the group to explore its heterogeneity and

differing identification with groups in the outside world. However as tensions emerged between our individual and collective identities, the rule of being polite and avoiding personal conflicts made it difficult for members to explore differences openly.

One instance of such avoidance occurred when only one of the six male members of the group participated in a day-long trip to an inner-city residential substance abuse program for women. The six women and one man who did attend repeatedly noted the absence of the other male members and speculated that the site visit might not have been considered a legitimate seminar enterprise by those who chose not to attend. Despite these allusions, no one chose to discuss his absence either during the seminar or when the writing subgroup began working on this paper, leaving unclarified the lack of participation. The first time an explanation was offered occurred after one male member reviewed a draft of this paper and commented:

> I did not go on the field trip, but not from lack of interest; I can't recall the reason, but it was some kind of conflict (or perhaps it was near the time of the birth of our child). In any event, it would be wrong to read my absence (and perhaps the absence of other men) as a statement about anything except the busy-ness of life.

Whether or not this particular issue should have been discussed more openly, these writers wonder how the elite overclass can remedy its deviancy view of the urban underclass if a relatively homogeneous group of individuals experience discomfort among our own ranks in making our differences with one another less covert and, therefore, less menacing. We will return to this issue at the end of the paper.

Knowing through Action: What to Do When the Problem Is Intractable

Because of the general feeling of urgency about the urban crisis, *Cities, Class, and Conflict* began with a specific intervention goal, namely to develop strategies for addressing urban problems in a research university with Detroit being a special focus. While the authors assigned fewer sessions to the action-taking category, these sessions seemed to push the group to clarify its role more than any others. We selected readings and invited guests to gain an overview of what

academics were doing in the way of urban interventions, and then discussed a number of specific action proposals that had the potential of altering the seminar format as well as PCMA's role in the university. These discussions led to a debate about what types of action might be appropriate given our skills as professors, the nature of the problem, and the possible roles that we might assume in the university as described below.

Developing Strategies for Social Change

As suggested earlier, individuals differed in our valuing of gaining an intellectual understanding of problems in cities and taking action on these problems versus valuing a focus on the group, our privileges and complicity in enabling urban problems. When considering possibilities for activism, some members questioned the group's capacity to apply our knowledge in hands-on crisis situations. As one participant put it:

> I wonder how close we want to get to it [poverty]. I think it was about a year ago I got a call from a local lawyer who had a client who was in the [homeless] shelter and they were going to take her kid and they said she had to see a psychologist. They called and asked me if I would see her. And I went down, and I'd never been to the shelter. You see them one at a time on the streets; its very different then when you go into that shelter and get right inside. I was not as up on it as I thought I was, and it took a little bit of time to really get adjusted, to get that close to it. It was quite an experience.

During the year, three proposals were generated that reflected the group's varying orientation to what constituted socially-responsible action. One suggestion would have involved the entire group in an action project in the local community; some people believed that this would result in strategies for alleviating inequitable conditions while providing a stage upon which to learn more about the group's privileges. Another suggestion was to develop a set of socially-responsible screens for academic life, for example evaluating the types of topics and projects that one pursues. Such screens would comprise guidelines to faculty to assist them in being more aware of privilege and in conducting their affairs in more socially-conscious ways. The third suggestion (one that was actually implemented by some seminar members) was to assist a needy

family during the holidays, an intervention that led to debate over whether this was a relevant strategy for addressing social change.

> I think there's always this kind of paradoxical tension . . . . I remember the tension to social workers—for welfare. Should we sort of do these things individually or should we wait until the pain sort of builds until there's revolution. And I think you have to do everything. You do some of each. If there's a family that needs something. . . we should do it. But it's never enough and its never not enough. That's the thing, because no individual kind of thing is going to change it.

At other times during the year, writing for the popular press was considered along with various other action roles. One person suggested that the large group seminar not meet for a period of time so that individuals and small groups could elaborate written action project proposals. This person later created such a project that involved a subgroup in an intervention at a local grass-roots social service agency; another person became involved in assessing the impact of being a grass-roots health worker in a migrant community; an individual conducted a seminar on spirituality and social work practice; and a group of individuals initiated an exchange of community problem-solving efforts between local organizations in a developing country and the city of Detroit. As mentioned earlier, these activities and many other individual investigations influenced the content and conduct of the seminar.[5]

Defining Alternative Institutional Roles

The seminar series brought up several questions regarding PCMA's purpose, including whether PCMA should primarily seek to support the work of individual members, of subgroups, or of the full organization as well as whether our focus should be on action, research, or consciousness-raising. At the heart of these questions was individuals' perceptions of themselves with respect to the norms of the institution. Some members viewed their role as more central; others valued what they perceived as a position of creative marginality. For the latter, marginality

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[5]   A significant action that was taken as a result of these discussions occurred during the following year when PCMA applied for and received support to conduct a university-wide seminar on conflict and community as a way of disseminating our ideas in a more public arena.

was seen as a "site of radical possibility, a space of resistance . . . a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives . . . a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (hooks, 1990, pp. 149-150). But Freire (1985) spoke of the risks of marginality:

> *I have been trying to think and teach by keeping one foot inside the system and the other foot outside . . . . To have an effect, I cannot live on the margins of the system. I have to be in it. Naturally, this generates a certain ambiguity that is part of our existence as political beings . . . . What is the nature of this ambiguity? In terms of tactics, we all have one foot inside the system, and strategically we have the other foot outside the system. This ambiguity is often risky. That's why many people keep both their feet squarely inside the system. I know some people who sometimes slowly try to place their right foot outside, but they are immediately overcome by fear. They see other people who have stepped outside and are punished* (p. 178).

At the conclusion of the seminar, one member put the issue of how far to step outside the system into a decision-making framework that ranged from accepting traditional university norms to resisting them in pursuit of social change. Activist scholars who are most accepting of norms pursue the teaching, research, and service for which we have been trained, which is recognized in the academy, but which also is helpful to causes, constituencies, and organizations engaged in justice-oriented struggles. A second level of functioning involves creating alternative, but university-recognized, programs that encompass a social justice agenda. A third alternative offers the possibility of being employed by the university while going outside traditional roles and norms to be involved in causes, movements, organizations, and communities engaged in justice-oriented work.

A fourth alternative achieves boundary spanning, new bases of credibility, greater flexibility, and more accountability to social justice values and organizations. This role, which can be characterized as one of marginality, involves searching out and maintaining "safe spaces" that create minimum demands and maximum freedom relative to the concerns of university authority. For those who are most resisting of university traditions is the option of committing class suicide or otherwise leaving one's identity and privileged peer group to assume new goals and a new identity and life style. Each or these roles requires an ability to temper social change with one's

own growth. According to Coles (1993): "The activists who stay the course longest seemed to have figured out how far they can go in prodding others, how deep within themselves they must look. They have a mixture of political insistence and introspective tentativeness that allows them to be effective in spite of the ever-present frustrations" (p. 40). Since PCMA participants see ourselves in varying roles relative to the university contexts, we have differing degrees of satisfaction with the group's accomplishments.

Innovation through Multiple Ways of Knowing

What values and needs are being promulgated by the middle and upper classes and how do these values and needs fuel the urban crisis. As Wachtel (1989) points out, the quest for abundance has resulted in an insatiable need for more—more automobiles, more air conditioners, more space, more education—that impedes a communal approach to earth's limited resources. Powerful individuals compete with one another to get larger chunks of the American Dream, thereby creating a way of life that makes into necessities the luxuries that less powerful individuals can ill-afford as is the case with the promotion of an automobile-dependent society.

> *As we have placed our resources more and more at the disposal of the private automobile, suburban shopping centers have largely taken the place of urban commercial centers; and factories too have tended to move away from the cities and into areas accessible only by car. All these factors now make two cars necessary for many in order to accomplish the tasks of shopping and getting to and from work with any degree of convenience* (ibid., pp. 16-17).

To understand how we might, as activist scholars, help to discourage the insatiable materialism, racism, and classism that have led to the urban crisis, PCMA faculty set out to acquire a wholistic understanding of the problem. The authors of this paper organized the discussions that resulted from the group's varied forms of inquiry as theorizing, self-reflecting, group processing, and action-taking. According to this analysis, theorizing provided a means for probing the interconnectedness of privilege and poverty, and for exploring spirituality as a means of understanding and potentially altering oppressive relationships. Self-reflecting led us to question the impact of class on each person's work and to a struggle to balance personal reflection with

exploration of substantive issues. Group processing involved us in discussing our monopoly on knowledge and in recognizing different orientations within the group to our shared agenda of social justice. Action-taking engaged participants in developing appropriate strategies for social change and in exploring alternative institutional roles. These four ways of knowing and the discussion themes we assigned to each method are depicted in Figure 3.

- Developing Strategies for Social Change
- Defining Alternative Institutional Roles

- Relinquishing the Monopoly on Knowledge
- Acknowledging Differences within the Group

Understanding the Urban Crisis

- Defining the Nature of Inequality and Privilege
- Promoting Social Justice through Spirituality

- Understanding Class and Its Impact on Our Work
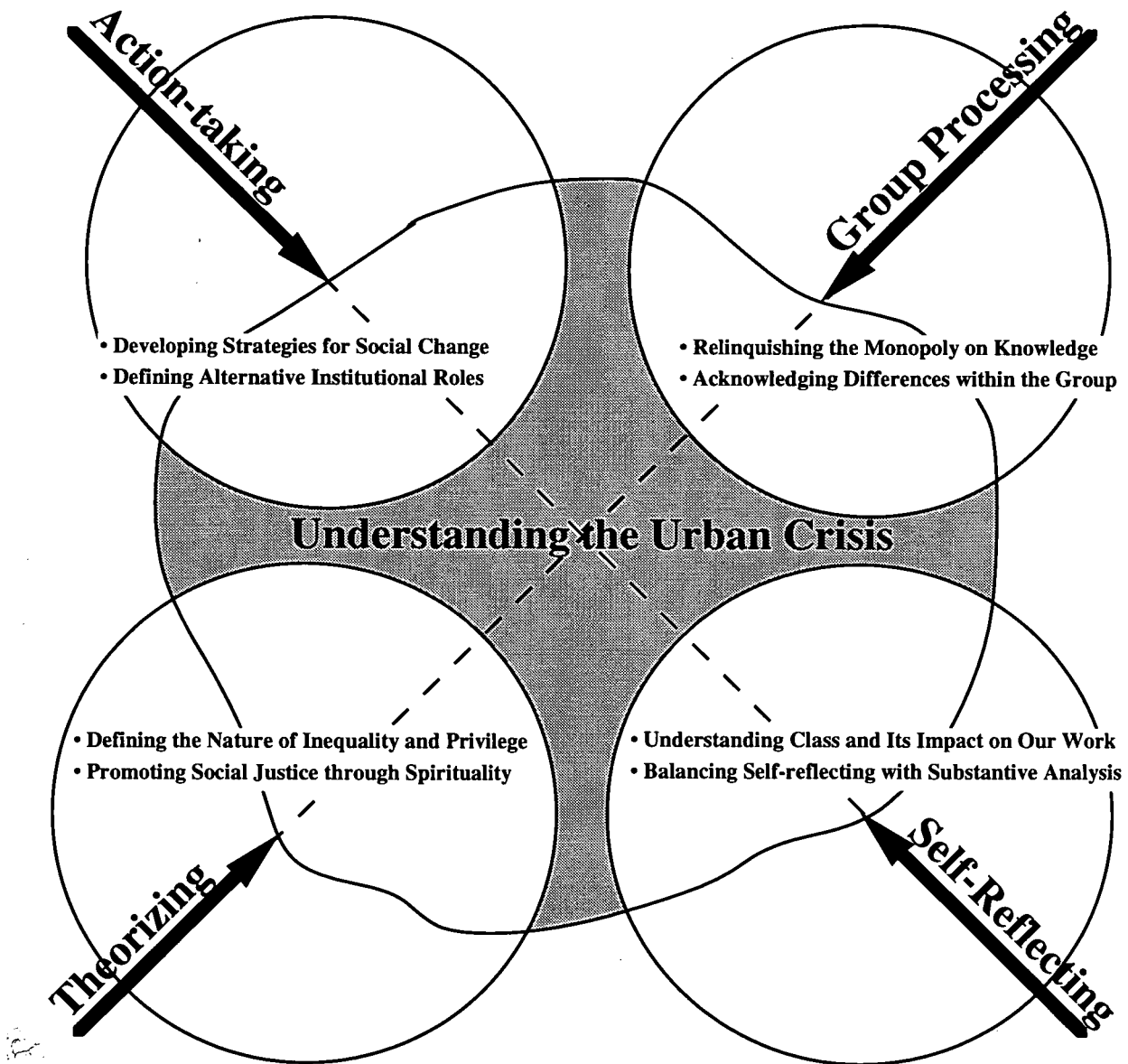- Balancing Self-reflecting with Substantive Analysis

Figure 3: Themes Discussed via Four Ways of Knowing

By viewing urban inequality through multiple lenses, PCMA hoped to overcome the limitations of traditional Western positivist methods of scholarship which pretend that there is a single objective truth that is being pursued through methods that are routed in the natural sciences. We began, instead, with the assumption that traditional methods produce emotional distance from the arena of inquiry, objectify problems as well as the people involved, and functionally separate the inquirer from the subject matter, the doer from the action. This constitutes what Frankenburg (1993) termed "epistemic violence" and parallels the market values of a capitalist society, commodifying knowledge as well as the people about whom we are attempting to gain knowledge. Positivist methods allow "us" to use "them" for our purposes, places them at an emotional and physical distance, and ensures our superior role and status.

PCMA attempted reconnect to the persons we were studying and to expand our level of awareness and creativity—organizationally and individually—in dealing with the subject matter. The varied perspectives that were incorporated into the seminar promoted a sense of dis-ease and striving for an ideal that is essential to innovation and transformation.

> *[The creative person] is no longer satisfied with the possible and the conditional; he [sic] now conceives the impossible, the unconditional, the infinitely bigger and the infinitely smaller, the absolute, the whole, nothingness, the real, the unreal, and the increasing expansion of reality. . . . The ideal thus actually becomes one of the strongest motivational forces in creativity* (Arieti, 1976, pp. 93-94).

Yet the seminar appeared quite confusing at times and, as we have indicated earlier, participants had differing assessments of the seminar's outcomes which, whatever they might have been, were pushed to another level through the critical reflections of the authors of this paper. One member who reviewed a draft of the paper commented on the inadequacies of the seminar and characterized its post-facto interpretation as follows:

> I think for me the issue is probably that the seminar itself was a beginning, just a beginning, and left about everything unresolved. . . . I saw a group that had a lot of trouble dealing with personal issues; the theme of the seminar; talking to one another, or not talking to one another; and, in general, not getting very far on this topic or in the group process. That's less a criticism of PCMA—these are difficult issues and we don't meet that often—but more a contrast with the paper's glorification of PCMA, simplification of issues, and too many insights gained. I think we just started learning and that the group are just beginning to deal with issues.

In a curious way, this comment affirms the central message of this paper, namely that those alternative ways of thinking and acting that can bring about greater justice in the nation's inner cities require a tremendous struggle—with the subject matter as well as with ourselves as participants in a social system. Acknowledging that these conclusions were elaborated through our post-facto analysis of the seminar, we offer the following thoughts on creating a community of inquiry that can be more effective in bringing about social change in the nation's inner cities.

Creating a Community of Resistance

The multiple connections of the urban crisis to sociopolitical dynamics cannot be addressed through discipline-based scholarship but require, rather, a broadened scope of analysis that encompasses the functioning of the political economy within given sociocultural contexts. In particular, the urban crisis requires an understanding of who has the political power to determine the nature and distribution of the country's infrastructure, who lives in central cities as opposed to suburbs and other areas, how corporate decision-makers wield political influence to determine where the biggest corporations with the best jobs are located and who is employed, and so forth. Due to the increasingly global economic and communications system, the urban crisis requires an understanding of global patterns of development including the rapid growth of megalopolises that encompass extremely wealthy and utterly destitute areas.

Such a broadened scope of analysis would include a focus on the capacity of elite groups to influence the resources that are available to central cities as well as the private and public policies and attitudes that shape the lives of inner-city residences. Such an analysis can not avoid attending to classism, racism, sexism, and the dynamics of oppression including the differing roles that oppressors and the oppressed assume in the sociopolitical system. It is vital to recognize that dominant groups shape and control the realities of subordinate groups including their everyday behavior, perceptions, and values; and to acknowledge the differential ability of dominant and subordinate groups to fulfill basic needs and access the finer aspects of the society. It is vital for academics to acknowledge that while prevailing modes of teaching and research accept the values

and power of the status quo as a distant and objective reality, we all function within a context that maintains our own superior social rank.

Addressing the urban crisis requires a community of resistance to counter these prevailing modes of academic behavior. Such a community would endeavor to develop interventions at the societal and global levels, but it also would recognize the need for change at the level of individuals, groups, and organizations. In both regards, prevailing patterns of oppression need to be described and analyzed—abstractly as well as concretely with regard to larger social units—and then considered relative to the embeddedness of the individuals who are doing the analysis in the rewards of the status quo.

A community of resistance would, in some way, actively engage with the people and issues that are the focus of its inquiry so as to test its evolving theory of social justice and social change. In this way the distortions of detached, so-called objective analysis can be lessened, the allocations of resources for academic work can be directly responsive to social need, and social change can begin to have a major presence in academic work. It goes without saying that such active engagement hinges on having greater diversity in the composition of faculties and student bodies and requires major cultural change within academia to legitimate the realities and suppressed voices of all those involved in the teaching/learning/researching processes.

A community of resistance would take risks in expressing the diverse perspectives within its own ranks as a way of becoming more open to the viewpoints of disenfranchised persons. To do this requires a safe environment—not one that is sanctified or overly protective but one that offers a safety net; it requires a willingness to be patient with one another—about ignorance, silence, violation, fear, awkwardness, pain, and so forth; it requires a willingness to be impatient about these same things. Thus a community of resistance would seek to protect and correct its members, however self-correcting is very problematic without the presence of the "other". In our own case, PCMA's membership has varying races, genders, religious beliefs, and family class backgrounds; however as primarily tenured faculty at an elite university, we are all members of a

very privileged class. Without stepping further outside our ivory tower, we are limited in testing our ways of "knowing" the inner-city crisis. A community of resistance would include within their ranks members of those oppressed and disadvantaged groups who currently are only the objects of liberal-minded discourse. Such inclusion would not only enable those groups to define their own reality, it would serve to surpress the tendency of academics to objectify the poor and thus distance themselves from social problems.

Finally a community of resistance would acknowledge the unlikelihood of acheiving its struggle for redistributive justice while finding satisfaction in the process of working for change, as Derrick Bell (1992) has suggested.

> *The challenge throughout has been to tell what I view as the truth about racism without causing disabling despair . . . . Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress", short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance . . . . We believe in fulfillment—some might call it salvation—through struggle. We reject any philosophy that insists on measuring life's success on the achieving of specific goals—overlooking the process of living. More affirmatively and as a matter of faith, we believe that despite the lack of linear progress, there is satisfaction in the struggle itself* (pp. ix, 12, 98)

Recalling the emotions of those persons who have taken part in an organized resistance movement or other liberatory efforts, hooks (1990) also described a sense of power and joy that comes from struggle.

> *You know that there is joy in struggle. . . . When we sang together 'We shall overcome,' there was a sense of victory, a sense of power that comes when we strive to be self-determining. When Malcolm X spoke about his journey to Mecca, the awareness he achieved, he gave expression to the joy that comes from struggling to grow. When Martin Luther King talked about having been to the mountain top, he was sharing with us that he arrived at a peak of critical awareness, and it gave him great joy. . . . The struggle to be critically conscious can be that movement that takes you to another level, that lifts you up, that makes you feel better* (pp. 211-212).

According to hooks, being part of a community of resistance is essential to the struggle for social justice—an important insight that PCMA members gained during the seminar. Through this

paper, we hope that we have been able to share some of the joys of our efforts to grow, and that we have been able to engage the reader in the collective learning of our community of resistance.

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