

WHY DOES EVERYONE I KNOW FEEL ANXIOUS

HOSTING PRECARITY

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING CIRCLES

A Score for Performance

LET'S TALK ABOUT ANXIETY : HOSTING PRECARITY CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING CIRCLES

A score

Developed by Eliot Feenstra, June 2018

First edition

This project is inspired by an essay called “Anxiety, affective struggle, and precarity consciousness-raising” published by the Institute for Precarious Consciousness, a UK-based militant research collective, in the November 2014 issue of *Interface: a journal about social movements* and can be found at http://www.interfacejournal.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Issue-6_2-IPC.pdf. The essay was condensed and re-released by We Are Plan C under the title “We Are All Very Anxious” and can be found here: <https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/>.

This document extends the work of the Institute’s paper by proposing a “score” or structure for consciousness-raising circles focusing on anxiety/precarity which ideally could happen in parallel in the Fall of 2018 (or anytime, anywhere) and share emergent ideas and strategy, widening our pool of knowledge and developing ideas and actions by focusing on precarity and anxiety. Much of the text is taken directly from the Institute’s article printed in *Interface*, and other cited works are listed at the end.

This project was conceived through a conversation on the porch at Ponderosa, a dance/performance land project in rural Germany, in July of 2017, and workshopped during the School of Making Thinking’s “Performing Playwriting” residency, held at the Prattsville Arts Center in Prattsville, New York in June of 2018. Particular thanks also to Sophie Traub and Ariana Jacobs for lending their thoughts and support.

BACKGROUND

In the essay, the authors theorize that different political eras have a “dominant reactive affect”—a feeling which is experienced by many in the population as a manifestation of the economic/political situation but which is held as a kind of “public secret” (a phrase developed by the Situationists)—that is, “something which is generally visible, which is either known or so visible that it appears it should be known, but which is not discussed or declared” (Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014: 273). The task of social movements is to defeat this dominant reactive affect.

During industrialization, that dominant reactive affect was misery (particularly of the proletariat), which theorists such as Marx recognized and this “first wave” of social movements responded to through wage and welfare struggles and mutual aid. Then, the strategy of capital switched to a strategy based on boredom—decently paid but monotonous work created an experience of a “flat” world with no outside as well as the existential malaise and depression among housewives—which was a public secret. In the 1960s, discourses emerged that showed this public secret. Most of the tactics of contemporary social movements (sit-downs, sit-ins, carnivalesque protests, black blocs, and protest camps) come from this era (274).

However, the authors posit, while this resistance partly succeeded, capitalism has recomposed itself with a different structure: there is now a dominant reactive affect/public secret of anxiety which works by keeping people in a “chronic state of near-collapse” fueling a “global panic” and creating a widespread feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness (275). Contemporary work situations are often managed through stress and disposability (277).

In short, the authors are suggesting that anxiety is a “socially manufactured affect, rather than a personal deficit or individual difference” which is a result of the economic precarity which most of us are facing (277). A new wave of tactics and strategies is needed that respond to this “public secret.” How might we formulate a pedagogy targeting anxiety?

WHY CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING GROUPS?

The paper proposes drawing from the model of consciousness-raising groups (or circles), which were popularized by US feminists in the late 1960s. Anita Shreve claimed that “in 1973, probably at the height of CR, 100,000 women in the United States belonged to CR groups.” These groups were a response to the idea that women were isolated from each other and that as a result many problems in their lives were misunderstood as personal rather than expressions of systematic forms of oppression. Consciousness raising groups aimed to get a better understanding of how that oppression worked by bringing women together to discuss and analyze their own lives. Key to this approach is that idea that “our feelings will lead us to ideas and then to actions” (Sarachild, *Feminist Revolution*, Appendix, p. 202).

A SCORE FOR PERFORMANCE

Widening our collective pool of knowledge / sharing results

I’m interested in running a precarity consciousness-raising group in Toronto, Canada, over a period of 8 weeks from October to December of 2018. Towards the end of widening our pool of collective knowledge/understanding of our contemporary situation, this is an invitation to host a precarity consciousness-raising circle and to share results/ideas/actions that emerge with others engaged in similar groups and thinking.

Please get in touch via email at eliot.feenstra@gmail.com if you are interested in participating. Groups will meet independently and share ideas/actions that emerge from the CR groups.

This document is a set of notes, principles, and guidelines drawn from research and the Institute’s article (and the re-release by We Are Plan C) intended to support you in joining this endeavor.

Getting a group together.

In Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, Judith Butler suggests that identity politics “fails to furnish a broader concept of what it means, politically, to live together across difference” and suggests that precarity—the destruction of the conditions of livability—is a galvanizing force and site to rally around (2015).

Consider who you'd like to form a group with. It could be friends, people with a common interest in the topic, people who are in similar work situations (ex. others with multiple part-time jobs, adjunct faculty, etc.), creative workers, etc. One interesting aspect of focusing on anxiety/precarity as a rallying point is that whereas "women" is a general social category, the precariat (those on the brunt end of generalized precarity) is not.

FIRST SESSIONS

Establishing group norms.

Begin the first session by giving some background to this idea—a brief summary of why we're focusing on anxiety/precarity, the history of consciousness-raising groups and why we're using this method, and the goal of the work.

In our group, I wrote up these "CR guiding principles" on a big sheet of paper and hung it on the wall during our session. Posting these principles can help the group feel a sense of distributed leadership so that we can gently invite each other to speak from experience or work through conflicts or difficult moments that emerge with this as a toolkit.

(Italics indicate clarifying text which I spoke aloud as we went over the principles.)

- Speaking from experience
- Validating the reality of one's own feelings and experiences--*that our feelings are something political that will lead us to ideas and then to actions; our feelings have a political nature.*
- Everyone has a voice - *not an obligation to participate but the opportunity to construct a voice.*
- Creating a safe space--confidential, no judgement
- Permission to feel & for feelings to transform –*The goal is to redefine and therefore transform particular emotions arising from oppression--transforming affects in a positive direction--from personal emotions to collective sense of injustice. Particularly important for the feminist CR groups was permission to feel anger--towards confronting those who have hurt us rather than being turned inwards. Generally, recognizing beings as individuals with emotional needs and fears.*
- Looking for "the click"--*Let's pay attention to moments when things get reframed or you can see a personal story/feeling in a personal light.*
- Emphasis on integration and analysis—*the aim is not to recount experiences for their own sake or for psychological benefit but rather to provide a wider pool of knowledge.*

- The personal is political.
- Starting from here (not from outside)—*Stories and experiences don't have to just be pulled from faraway moments—notice your experience within this circle and how you feel right now. But this also refers to the exciting project that we're making thinking from our own experiences and feelings—outside theories might be helpful or not, but part of this work is about using the internal and felt as a guide towards ideas and actions.*

Review logistical notes. (Keep this relatively brief.) Can people come and go freely? If someone enters late, how does the group feel about their joining in? Is it okay to record the sessions? To write during other peoples' shares?

If these discussions become fraught, remind the group of the overall goals (ex. to contribute to a wider pool of knowledge, to disalienate or de-isolate the experience of anxiety, to find the patterns in our stories, and to let ideas and action emerge from feelings). What agreements around documentation and group practices will best serve the group's goals and promote a space of warmth, respect, and curiosity?

I also like to remind the group that ideally the time is also enjoyable, that we have a good time together and learn something. This might be a good moment to discuss whether there will be a break, if you'd like to bring food or arrange for someone to bring snacks for each session, if all sessions will be held in the same place or if there will be a sign-up for hosting, etc. Depending on the intimacy of the group, people may be a little on edge about committing before getting a sense of what you'll be doing together, so it might make more sense to talk about plans for future sessions (snacks, hosting, themes, etc.) at the end, on a break, or via email.

Confirm the time that the group will end and that there will be a time to sum up / integrate / analyse at the end. Keep in mind that the idea of talking about anxiety could bring up anxiety, so I'd suggest doing what you can to make the space/time together grounded, cozy, and safe-feeling, and to invite the group to notice how their anxiety might be alive in anticipation of the session as well as during the session.

How will you document your process? How would your group like to document your process? Possibilities could include recording, filming, gathering notes, choosing a single or rotating note-taker, photographing or transcribing collective notes from the "summing up" period at the end of the sessions, writing about the experience individually or collectively, a shared blog for ongoing reflection or sharing resources, a manifesto-writing at the end of all the sessions, etc. Perhaps

you do many of these things. It would be great if there is some way of documenting your process that could be shared with other groups by the end.

While precarity is a ‘site to rally around’ for many kinds of people, it might be worth noticing and somehow sharing in your documentation who is in your group and how that is informing your perspective.

Focus/Themes.

In the workshop I held, the general theme was “anxiety and precarity” and participants shared stories related to this theme. For a longer-term group, it could be helpful to choose particular themes or questions for each group. Even just from our brief workshop, the group observed many emergent themes which are both related and distinct:

- Busyness
- Success/ambition
- Self-worth
- Did you learn anxiety? Did you inherit anxiety?
- Scarcity
- Social polarization & fear of being associated with something/someone
- How does anxiety relate to fear? What fears does precarity evoke?
- City vs. rural
- Inconvenient feelings
- Strategies of managing and coping
- Pharmaceuticals and medicalization of anxiety/anxious disorders
- Identity (and narratives of the self)
- On the job/at work
- Finding employment/making money
- Downward mobility, or income or class position relative to parents/grandparents/peers
- Increasing “gig labor” economy – experience with having multiple part-time jobs, temporary work, “underemployment,” etc.
- What “security” or “stability” means/looks like
- Navigating citizenship/visa/immigration processes, crossing borders
- How anxiety/precarity shows up in the body
- Failure (or, hitting rock bottom, not measuring up, etc.)
- Media/social media
- Love, intimacy, and sex
- Impacts on/in community
- Dissatisfaction

- Trust, dependence, and commitment
- Decision-making
- In relation to architecture, how space is structured, etc. (whether on the scale of a city, an airport, a living room, etc.)

These are rough points that could be turned into more specific questions or just offered up as a theme for the session. Keep in mind that the goal is that people are relating and sharing personal stories/experiences from their lived reality and a very “heady” question or one that requires background knowledge might make the dialogue less easy for some people to enter.

Alternatively, your group might generate a list like this from your first session, too, and choose to focus on certain aspects/themes within the group’s experience.

Possible outline for precarity consciousness-raising group.

(15-20 minutes for first session) Intro context, goals, method, review group principles.

(1 hour or more) Open discussion/story-sharing.

(20 minutes) Summing up, observing patterns or themes; have someone document these.

(5-10 minutes) Close circle, thank participants, and share info about next meeting or next steps (could be space for ‘announcements’ from group as well).

Total time: At least an hour and a half;
ideally 2-3 hours.

POTENTIALLY USEFUL KEY TERMS (not exhaustive or static)

precarity – Precarity is 'non-self-determined insecurity' across work and life (Raunig, 2004), with insecure access to means to survive or flourish (Precarias, 2004). It uses insecurity to impose normalisation (Lorey, 2010; Bourdieu, 1998: 85), and treats people as disposable (Mitropoulos, 2005). It operates by rendering people's lives 'contingent on capital' (Mitropoulos, 2005). Precarity leads to 'yo-yo hours and days' which interfere with human contact (Tari and Vanni, 2005) and eliminate the sense of a distinct future, due to time-space compression (Neilson and Rossiter, n.d.) or 'present shock' (Rushkoff, 2013). It corrodes one's ability to distinguish life from work (Fantone, 2006). The affective effects of this situation contribute to anxiety. Berardi argues that precarity leads to constant bodily excitation without means of release (Berardi, 2009: 90-1), and with a socially-imposed impossibility of relaxation (2009: 119). People are constantly over-stimulated by information and sensory input which over-engages attention (2009: 97, 115), leading to a 'constant attentive stress' (2009: 42) (Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014: 277).

anxiety – (1) apprehensive uneasiness or nervousness usually over an impending or anticipated ill : a state of being anxious; [medical] : an abnormal and overwhelming sense of apprehension and fear often marked by physical signs (such as tension, sweating, and increased pulse rate), by doubt concerning the reality and nature of the threat, and by self-doubt about one's capacity to cope with it

(2) : mentally distressing concern or interest;

(3) : a strong desire sometimes mixed with doubt, fear, or uneasiness (Merriam Webster)

Also: Wilhelm Reich theorises anxiety as a result of conflict between the libido (or active force) and the outer world, and as the source of character-armour and reactive formations (Reich, 1980: 48, 342, 347; Brinton, 1972: 29).

neoliberalism – From The Handbook of Neoliberalism: “At a base level we can say that when we make reference to 'neoliberalism', we are generally referring to the new political, economic and social arrangements within society that emphasize market relations, re-tasking the role of the state, and individual responsibility. Most scholars tend to agree that neoliberalism is broadly defined as the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life, including the economy, politics and society.” (2016: 2)

Related to this, Noam Chomsky notes that “its crucial principle is undermining mechanisms of social solidarity and mutual support and popular engagement in determining policy.” (2010)

The term neoliberalism has been used by various scholars, critics and analysts, mainly referring to an upspring of 19th-century ideas connected to economic liberalism that began in the 1970s and 1980s. These ideals advocate for extensive economic liberalization and policies that extend the rights and abilities of the private sector over the public sector, specifically the shutting down of state and government power over the economy. (Investopedia.com)

Neoliberalism is often associated with laissez-faire economics, a policy that prescribes a minimal amount of government interference in the economic issues of individuals and society. It is usually characterized by its belief that continued economic growth will lead to human progress, its confidence in free markets and emphases on limited state interference. (Investopedia.com) The neoliberal era has also been characterized by a decline in real wages, centralization of wealth in the hands of fewer people, increase of corporate control/power, use of state power for the benefit of the concentration of economic powers (for instance, research and development that emerges from the public sector, is publicly funded, and then dominated by and profited from by corporate markets) and development of new financial institutions which are disconnected from the real economy (Noam Chomsky).

consciousness-raising group – Popularized by the 1970s feminist movement in the US, consciousness-raising groups were a strategic response to the idea that women were isolated from each other and that as a result many problems in their lives were misunderstood as personal rather than expressions of systematic forms of oppression. Consciousness raising groups aimed to get a better understanding of how that oppression worked by bringing women together to discuss and analyze their own lives. They also rest on a foundational idea that from feelings, ideas and actions can emerge.

score – A set of directions for a performance or improvisation.

affect – "Affect" can mean an instinctual reaction to stimulation that occurs before the typical cognitive processes considered necessary for the formation of a more complex emotion. (Wikipedia)

dominant reactive affect – affective state induced by the dominant form of power, such as misery, boredom or anxiety; tends to be personalized and reinforced by a culture of silence or submersion (see "public secret"). The dominant reactive affect persists as long as effective resistances haven't been formulated. (273)

the click – a moment of recognizing a feeling (such as anxiety) as a social effect and a matter of power, which then shifts perceptions of the social field and narratives of oppression and liberation. Also a moment of depersonalizing a feeling/state and relating it to structural sources. (288)

public secret – A public secret is something which is generally visible, which is either known or so visible that it appears it should be known, but which is not discussed or declared – like the Emperor's nakedness or the elephant in the living room. (Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 2014: 273)

capitalism -

reactive -

Fordism –

pedagogy –

alienation –

dis-alienation –

capital –

capitalism -

normalization –

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