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ARTICLE

# The "Vanishing Self": Understanding Consciousness-Raising as a Transformative Experience

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**Abstract**

Despite the centrality of the achievement thesis within standpoint epistemology, thereare gaps in the literature on the epistemic significance of consciousness-raising and itsrole in providing access to knowledge that was previously inaccessible. To addressthese gaps, I argue that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience, one thatmakes us a different person. If, as the standpoint epistemologist suggests, what weknow is sensitive to facts about who we are, then to change what we know we mustchange who we are.

**Keywords:** consciousness-raising; achievement thesis; transformative experience; standpoint epistemology; deference

*He stood close to her, and the effrontery in his eyes repelled the old, vanishing self in her, yet drew all her awakening consciousness.* —*Kate Chopin, The Awakening*

## 1. Introduction

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899/1993) centers on the awakening consciousness of its protagonist, Edna Pontellier. Over the course of the novel, Edna, a wife and mother, begins to discover new parts of herself, slowly coming to the realization that she desires a life incompatible with the one that dominant social norms have prescribed for a woman of her station.

Written well before second-wave feminism introduced the practice of consciousness-raising, Chopin's *The Awakening* reveals a shockingly astute awareness of the fact that in having one's consciousness raised, one's old self recedes, and a new self begins to awaken. This insight is the impetus for unpacking a central and yet neglected thesis within standpoint epistemology and inspires the main claim of this essay: that consciousness-raising, the process by which a standpoint is achieved, is a transformative experience.

The achievement thesis is meant to specify how one moves from a dominant standpoint to a nondominant one, as well as why the knowledge produced from the latter is superior to that produced from the former. Consciousness-raising is the proffered answer. Though widely discussed among feminist theorists (Bartky, 1975; Hart, 1990; hooks, 2000; MacKinnon, 1989; Sarachild, 1978) as a method or program for uncovering social reality, little has been said about the epistemology of consciousness-raising: that is, *why* consciousness-raising enables access to knowledge that is "better, and more objective" (Kukla, 2006, p. 81) or in what way it changes the access that one has.

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I have three goals in this paper. First, I claim that to appreciate the epistemic significance of consciousness-raising, we must understand consciousness as phenomenally prefigured and epistemically mediated by the dominant standpoint. Second, I will argue that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience. The transformative nature of consciousness-raising helps make sense of its role in providing access to knowledge produced from nondominant standpoints. Third, I will show that this argument helps to make sense of pessimism toward interpretations of standpoint epistemology as a deference epistemology.

Here is the plan. Section 2 surveys what has been said thus far regarding the role of consciousness-raising in the achievement of a nondominant standpoint. In Section 3, I turn to a discussion of transformative experiences. With these pieces in place, in Section 4, I look at the state of consciousness *prior* to the act of consciousness-raising in order to motivate the claim I defend in Section 5 that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience. Section 6 suggests that this argument provides support for the claim that deference is incompatible with the aims of standpoint epistemology. In Section 7, I briefly consider the upshot of thinking about consciousness-raising as a transformative experience.

## 2. Consciousness-Raising as a Response to Domination

In discussions of standpoint theory, consciousness-raising is meant to do much work and yet, questions about this practice abound. How does consciousness-raising work? What does this process achieve? What does this practice look like and require from dominantly, as opposed to marginally located positions? Are some cases of consciousness-raising better (or worse) than others? What problems, if any, does intersectionality pose?

In this section, I attempt to address these inquiries. I open with a discussion of the dominant standpoint to which consciousness-raising responds, in order to draw out the effects of this standpoint as well as to make clear the remedies that the practice of consciousness-raising is meant to offer.

### 2.1. The dominant standpoint and the construction of reality

Let me begin by clarifying what I mean by the dominant standpoint and what I take the epistemic effects of this standpoint to be. Marx observed that the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas (Marx, 1978, pp. 172–174). Thus, it is not just that material life is structured by the ruling class, but that intellectual life is as well. The ruling class, in virtue of controlling the production of ideas, makes their standpoint the one from which the world is viewed while also assuming their standpoint captures and best represents social and material relations. This standpoint functions, in essence, as the default or "official" standpoint, which even the nonruling class must adopt.[1] This standpoint holds "pride of place" because it is widely held and promoted as true by the ruling class.

As Nancy Hartsock argues, the perspective of the ruling class, though partial and perverse, cannot be dismissed as false (1983, p. 285).[2] As she goes on to write, the vision of the ruling class is "made real by means of that group's power to define the terms for the community as a whole" (Ibid. p. 288). The ruling class thus "creates a reality that conforms to its image," constructing "a myth that

[1]Standpoint theorists (Harding, 1993; Hartsock, 1983; Wylie, 2003) refer to a standpoint as a critically held consciousness achieved through reflection. In this sense, it might be a mistake to think of the vision of the ruling class as a "dominant standpoint" if, as I suggest, it is a vision which is uncritically held. But for simplicity of language, I will refer to the vision of the ruling class as the dominant, or default, standpoint.

[2]Sally Haslanger (2011), in more contemporary literature, pursues this idea further, noting in her work on the effects of ideology that there is a "looping" effect. As she writes, "We are not simply cogs in structures of subordination, we enact them. And something about how we represent the world is both a constitutive part of that enactment and keeps it going" (180). Similarly, part of the reason that the claims produced by the dominant standpoint seems true is that we participate in social practices which make them true.

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makes itself true" (Harding, 1993, pp. 99, 104). This reality has been structured by the interests and to the advantage of the ruling class, a fact, moreover, that this reality then occludes (Ibid. pp. 90, 93). As Sandra Harding observes, the dominant standpoint (in Marxist analysis: the capitalist or bourgeoisie standpoint) is one in which "the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible" (Harding, 1993, p. 54, citing Hartsock, 1983, p. 285).

As an example, consider Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of *the myth of woman/femininity*. Tracing this myth as it evolves from primitive cultures and emerges in classic literature, de Beauvoir argues that this myth constructs an image of womanhood that posits an eternal feminine essence shared by all women. In the Barthesian sense of myth, "woman" thus comes to signify a particular social meaning. As "woman is exclusively defined in her relation to man," she is submissive, passive, immanent, and inessential, where he is dominant, active, transcendent, and essential (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 204). She is "an Other through whom he seeks himself" (Ibid. p. 97). The Other, as de Beauvoir writes, is always object, never subject. Consequently, man, conceived as subject, fails to reciprocally recognize and grasp woman as a subject in her own right (Ibid. p. 201). As de Beauvoir writes, woman is an inessential, absolute Other, eternally conceived of as an object in the eyes of man (Ibid. pp. 202–203, 321).

Importantly, this myth influences the behavior of women as they seek to embody the image this myth evokes: "the 'real woman' is one who accepts herself as Other" (Ibid. p. 331). In this sense, the myth interpellates and constructs the female *as* woman, as feminine, and makes this her identity. Women, as MacKinnon writes, are constructed as "naturally and eternally feminine"—nurturing, intuitive, frail, nimble, and motherly (1989, p. 90). And, as she observes, women who do not comply with this construction suffer "identity invalidation": "you are an evil woman…a whore…a failure as a woman…" (Ibid. p. 93). MacKinnon here echoes de Beauvoir, who writes that "if the definition [of the Eternal Feminine] given is contradicted by the behavior of real flesh-and-blood women, it is women who are wrong" (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 321).

Still further, in virtue of the fact that male power is "backed up by material indulgences and deprivations," women are thus coerced into complying with this myth (MacKinnon, 1989, pp. 93, 99). The social control and power that men derive from this arrangement, which makes women dependent on male support, encourage women to "ardently want to please men" (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p.197). "Once incarnated," male power, MacKinnon writes, is represented as "natural, universal, and unchangeable" (1989, pp. 93, 99). And so, this myth and the power relations it concretizes become confounded with "absolute truth" (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 204).

As both de Beauvoir and MacKinnon observe, this myth ultimately serves male advantage, providing for their economic and ontological interests by having someone who cares for their children and serves their sexual needs while also performing the menial labor that allows men (but not women) to achieve transcendence (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 201; MacKinnon, 1989, pp. 93–94).

The myth of woman represents but one example of the power of the ruling class to make true—to create in reality—the vision that best suits its interests. We can draw several important conclusions from this discussion regarding the epistemic significance of the dominant standpoint. First, the dominant standpoint represents its vision of the world as *the* vision of the world, as "absolute truth." Second, and as a consequence, conflicting views of reality (such as those that feminism makes available) are "defined as unreal or irrational" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 99). Third, those constructed as Other under this standpoint are "systematically deprived of a self" (Ibid. p. 89), subject to a conflict between how they experience themselves (as subject) and how this standpoint constructs them (as object). Fourth, these individuals experience diminished personal and epistemic agency under this standpoint. They can neither make themselves subjects (which requires a reciprocal movement in which each individual recognizes itself in another) to those who conceive them as objects, nor can they achieve transcendence ("the roads to transcendence are blocked: because [women] *do* nothing, they do not make themselves *be* anything") (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 327). They can neither share what knowledge they have with others ("to say that woman is mystery is to

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say not that she is silent but that her language is not heard") nor can they be truly known ("the other is always mystery") (Ibid. pp. 325–326).

As is perhaps obvious, the effects of this standpoint on the individual will depend on whether one is classified as subject or object, Person or Other. Thus, in the next two sections, I treat as separate consciousness-raising for the marginalized and for the dominant.

### 2.2. Consciousness-raising from marginalized locations

Given the constraints of the dominant standpoint, a nondominant standpoint is meant to be an epistemic achievement. To achieve a nondominant standpoint requires the development of a critical consciousness, a project referred to as consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising is described by Catherine MacKinnon variously as a way of knowing, a method or process, and a theory of knowing.

MacKinnon theorizes consciousness-raising in the context of the women's movement, a project whose beginning we could mark with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan's (1963) survey of her fellow Smith alumnae revealed the general discontent among American housewives and served as a catalyst for second-wave feminism. The work itself might be considered a prototype for the practice of consciousness-raising that would characterize the movement.

The aim of consciousness-raising, within this context, is to reveal the "realities hidden under layers of valued myth," to lift the veil on power relations and the myth by which these relations are made obscure, and to call into question the meaning, the givenness of, these relations (MacKinnon, 1989, pp. 89, 94–95). Sally Haslanger, in her work on this subject, writes that consciousness-raising prompts a "paradigm shift in one's orientation to the world," a shift that brings about changes in "what facts become accessible, our interpretation of them, and what responses are called for" (2021, p. 44).

The process by which this is achieved "is a face-to-face social experience" that is "collective and critical" (MacKinnon, 1989, pp. 95, 101). Haslanger expands on the communal aspect, noting that group participation is a critical aspect of consciousness-raising (2021, p. 50). It is the collective nature of consciousness-raising that gives rise to a paradigm shift, as it allows members to engage together to articulate insights that come from that participation.

The interpersonal, communal nature of consciousness-raising allows for making public what has been rendered private, given existing social norms (e.g., sexual relations), and thus enables participants to identify a shared reality of treatment that exists in virtue of some feature that members of this group share (e.g., gender) (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 95). The sharing and comparing of experiences enable data collection that provides evidence of treatment that is systematized and group-based (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 87; Haslanger, 2021, p. 50). As a result of this new evidence, participants work together to "grasp" their situation—that is, to develop and test hypotheses that best explain *why* this treatment occurs (Haslanger, 2021, pp. 51–52). This evidence enables participants to locate the source of this treatment in unjust social arrangements, practices, and structures rather than in any personal failure (Ibid. pp. 49–50).

Whatever form consciousness-raising takes—group discussion, reading groups, and so forth—it must be sufficient to allow one to unpack the "concrete…meaning of being [a non-X] in a society that [Xs] dominate" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 86). Absent this community and in isolation, one lacks the validation—and the breadth of evidence provided by others who share one's situation—needed to critically interrogate one's experiences and to identify those experiences as the result of systematic injustice (Haslanger, 2021, pp. 49–50). Consequently, one may interpret discontent as evidence that a person is "crazy, maladjusted, hormonally imbalanced, bitchy, or ungrateful" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 100).

Of note, however, is the suggestion from Haslanger that group participation is a critical aspect of consciousness-raising in cases where there is *not* already a critical paradigm in place (2021, p. 50). This thus leaves open the possibility of individual or localized consciousness-raising in cases where there *is* such a paradigm. We might think, then, that the women's movement and the

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consciousness-raising groups that resulted in that movement were necessarily communal. However, someone seeking to understand feminism today could plausibly raise consciousness through reading the feminist texts that this movement produced.[3]

The end of consciousness-raising, then, is the construction of an alternative paradigm, a nondominant standpoint, from which the power relations obscured by the dominant standpoint are made visible (Harding, 1993, p. 54, citing Hartsock, 1983, p. 285). Through consciousness-raising, the illusory, but real, nature of reality is revealed. A critical standpoint deconstructs this illusion, examines how it is constructed, and whose interests it serves. Consciousness-raising thus awakens participants to the possibility that there are other ways things could be, that "there both is and can be another reality" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 100).

The nondominant standpoint that consciousness-raising gives rise to is thought to generate knowledge that is better or more objective than knowledge produced from the dominant standpoint. Though this is regarded as controversial by some (for reasons I cannot touch on here), it is open to standpoint theorists to argue that nondominant standpoints yield knowledge that is more *complete* rather than more accurate or objective.[4] A feminist accounting of gendered relations which draws out the contingent origins of these relations is more complete than a patriarchal one that obscures these operations.

This approach benefits the standpoint theorist in two ways. First, it leaves available the possibility that even critically developed, nondominant standpoints can be the subject of critique and become more complete. As an example, consider feminist separatist movements that advocated for women's sex segregation from men. These movements might be rightly critiqued for failing to consider the ways in which patriarchy harms men *and* invests women in the policing of gendered norms (Hooks, 1984). Second, it allows standpoint theorists to articulate why some movements fail to constitute cases of consciousness-raising. Consider, for instance, men's rights activists (MRAs), many of whom have legitimate grievances (like the bias toward women in child custody cases) (Benatar, 2003). Regrettably, MRAs do not move closer to a critical consciousness, instead doubling-down on the dominant standpoint that constructs the very norms (e.g., women are more nurturing than men) that result in the decisions (e.g., that mothers will thus make better care-givers) they seek to challenge. Their standpoint is *accurate*—it is true, for instance, that courts show bias in favor of women in custody proceedings—but *less complete* than a feminist standpoint, which *accounts for* this bias by pointing to the gendered norms that comprise the dominant standpoint and that are meant to justify this bias. Rather than developing a critical stance toward the dominant standpoint that produces this state of affairs, MRA wrongly attributes this bias to advancements in women's rights.

Consciousness-raising then, to borrow language from Robin Celikates's discussion of ideology critique, needs not seek to "replace a mistaken or distorted view of social reality with one that is *correct*…rather, its task is to make it possible for agents to ask these questions and collectively look for answers to them themselves" (Celikates, 2016, p. 17 cited in Haslanger, 2021, p. 41, emphasis mine). Thus, we might think of consciousness-raising as an ongoing, iterative process that yields knowledge that is better and more complete than knowledge produced by previous iterations.

Interestingly, because material life structures consciousness, and the material life of those *with* power and those *without* are structurally different, the practice of consciousness-raising will differ for the marginal and the dominant. I turn to this consideration now.

### 2.3. Consciousness-raising from dominant locations

Thus far, I have provided a story of how those marginalized, under dominant standpoints, arrive at a nondominant standpoint. I have argued that the insights provided by marginalized locations allow these individuals to pierce through the dominant standpoint and gain access to the true nature of

[3]One might argue that different practices of consciousness-raising may be required depending on the extent to which aspects of a critical paradigms are yet available.

[4]See, for instance, Rolin (2006) on the "bias paradox" and Honneth (2009) on the critical dilemma.

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social relations. Through consciousness-raising, marginalized individuals come to articulate the inner workings and effects of the dominant standpoint on marginalized locations. However, a complete critique of the dominant standpoint must articulate the effect of this standpoint on dominant locations, for even those who are dominantly positioned must make sacrifices under this standpoint (e.g., the military draft for men).

Though consciousness-raising with respect to this standpoint is equally available to the dominantly positioned, the privileges they receive from this standpoint may act as roadblocks to critical analysis. The dominantly positioned may be subject to motivated irrationality, uncompelled to examine how their interests are served by that standpoint and unwilling to critique a system from which they derive some privilege (Alcoff, 2007; Mills, 2007). Consider here that the "warrior ideal" interpellates men in such a way that makes them conceptually ill-suited to childrearing, but also nets certain benefits, most notably social power and control.

As such, their own experiences of injustice under this standpoint can be a fruitful starting point for consciousness-raising among the dominant. To take this starting point requires that one both unpack the injustice one suffers and correctly locate the cause in the very systems from which one may receive benefits. Take, as an example, the "second sexism" experienced by men, for example, military service, loss of custody of their children.[5] Tom Digby argues that the cause of "second sexism" is not feminism, as David Benatar suggests, but ideals of masculinity that originate in warrior culture, ideals which characterize men as stoic, aggressive, competitive, and so forth (Digby, 2003).

The effects of the dominant standpoint on the dominantly located are much the same as they are for those who are marginally located, though to a lesser extent. Notice, for instance, that men, like women, are restrictively interpellated under this standpoint and that the constructions of men and women under this standpoint are oppositional and materially interlocked (Digby, 2003, p. 268). Under a dominant standpoint, those who are dominantly located may be conceived, more or less, as subjects: able to achieve transcendence, but only to the extent that they conform to dominant constructions.[6] They, too, may suffer diminished personal and epistemic agency. Men, for instance, in virtue of their interpellation as stoic, are restricted in their capacity for emotional expression and connection.

Another significant aspect of consciousness-raising will involve unpacking the manner in which one benefits from the oppression of those who are marginally situated. Men, for instance, must come to see how their advantages are derived from female subordination. It is at this point—consciousness-raising with respect to a standpoint from which one derives some benefit—that many movements fail. Though the women's movement did raise consciousness with respect to the effect of the dominant standpoint on women, it failed to adequately attend to the experiences of Black women, lesbians, and the working class. As such, it was most sensitive to the operations of this standpoint on heterosexual, middle- and upper-class, white women.

This touches on a worry that the standpoint theorist must confront—the influence of intersectionality and the potentially fractured nature of standpoints. One might worry that there will be a multiplicity of standpoints—a Black woman's standpoint, a white woman's standpoint, a lesbian woman's standpoint, and so on—and that this undermines the possibility for a unified standpoint (e.g., a feminist standpoint). However, as Patricia Hill Collins writes, intersectionality does not undermine the possibility of collective standpoint, but of a *homogenous* standpoint (2000, p. 28).

Consciousness-raising may start in fractured units, but in time these groups should coalesce as they recognize their shared situation and locate that situation as caused by social structures. As an effective instance of this in practice, take the Black Women's Association (BWA), which grew out of dissatisfactions with the male-oriented structure of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating

[5]"Second sexism" is a phrase coined by David Benatar (2003) to describe systemic male disadvantage.

[6]I say more-or-less to acknowledge and account for intersectionality. Gay men, inasmuch as they are considered "failed men," may be given less subjectivity than heterosexual men but are afforded more subjectivity than women.

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Committee (SNCC). Formed in 1970, the BWA by 1971 became the Third World Women's Association (TWWA). As the organizers of the TWWA explain, this move was motivated by the fact that "although Asian, Black, Chicana, Native American, and Puerto Rican sisters have certain differences, we began to see that we were all affected by the same general oppressions" (Jackson, 1971).[7]

What I take this to suggest is that consciousness-raising may begin as a highly localized, domain-specific program that is dimensional rather than categorical. We might first see groups raise consciousness with respect to one dimension (white womanhood) and then coordinate with other groups (those working on Black womanhood, lesbian womanhood, etc.) to investigate the core issues or themes that come from living *as* women. As these groups come together as a coalition, they must then examine what it means to live as a Black woman, a poor woman, a lesbian woman, and so forth. And this will mean that participants must raise consciousness with respect to dominant frameworks relating to race, class, and sexuality, as these features bear on the experiences of those women.

Many, including myself in the sections that follow, center marginalized locations in discussions of consciousness-raising. However, it is worth thinking about this practice from the perspective of the dominantly positioned for at least two reasons. First, many who seek to raise consciousness may be dominantly positioned in some dimension. The discussion above makes clear that dominant positioning does not foreclose the possibility of consciousness-raising. Second, this discussion makes clear that the achievement of a critical standpoint, and the knowledge produced from this standpoint, is not inaccessible to those who are dominantly positioned. Rather, this knowledge is inaccessible to those who have not engaged in consciousness-raising. This may seem a controversial point, but it is one that I hope to further motivate and explain by appeal to *transformative experiences*.

## 3. Transformative Experiences: Epistemic and Personal

Those who write on consciousness-raising are united in their description of it as transformative. MacKinnon, for instance, writes that "the process [of consciousness-raising] is transformative as well as perceptive, since thought and thing are inextricable and reciprocally constitutive of women's oppression" (1989, p. 84). Sandra Bartky describes becoming a feminist—which requires developing a critical consciousness on women's oppression—as involving "the experience of a profound personal transformation" (1975, p. 425). Similarly, Mechthild U. Hart, in a piece on the liberatory nature of consciousness-raising, observes that "writing about consciousness-raising is to write about an experience of personal and social transformation that pulsates with the joy and pain of subversive power" (1990, p. 47). Bell Hooks likewise writes of consciousness-raising that it must allow for strategies of intervention *and* transformation (2000, p. 7). Feminist writers seem to take for granted the notion that consciousness-raising is transformative. It is perhaps for this reason that the transformative nature of consciousness-raising is under-theorized.

What does it mean to say that consciousness-raising is transformative? To get a handle on this question, I draw on Laurie Paul's work on *transformative experiences*. Paul's exploration of transformative experiences centers on decision-making—that is, how can one rationally decide to undergo such an experience considering that the kind of person one is *after* the experience is likely to be very different from the person deciding to undergo that experience. As Paul writes, what complicates the decision to undergo a transformative experience is that through such an experience an "unknown, dramatically changed, *new self*" will arise (2014, p. 51, emphasis mine). My interest, with respect to Paul's analysis, is in the claim that such experiences *make you a different person*, a "new self," and what this might mean in the context of consciousness-raising.

[7]Thanks to Yarran Hominh for suggesting this example.

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Transformative experiences are those that are both *personally* and *epistemically* transformative. Epistemically transformative experiences, Paul writes, are those that teach you something you could not have learned without having had that kind of experience. As a paradigm case of an epistemically transformative experience, Paul offers Frank Jackson's example of Mary, the Color Scientist. Quoting David Lewis, she argues that what's noteworthy about this case is that Mary gains new abilities to recognize, imagine, and remember (Ibid. p. 9, citing Lewis 1988). As Paul writes, through epistemically transformative experiences, one "gains new abilities to cognitively entertain certain contents…learns to understand things in a new way, and… even gains new information" (Ibid. p. 11).

What is interesting about such experiences is that they make available information that was *inaccessible* before the experience: they reveal what had been concealed from view, and they transform our epistemic perspective, or outlook, on the world (Ibid. pp. 8, 10, 13). In this way, epistemically transformative experiences change how we are positioned, epistemically, in the world. By altering what evidence is available to us and making salient things that might have been obscured before, these experiences enable us to attend to the same thing but in ways we previously could not. They may expand our cognitive capacities, enabling us to reason in new ways with the evidence available. Likewise, they may change what we are disposed to believe in virtue of changing what explanations occur to us.

Transformative experiences may also be personal in nature. Personally transformative experiences are "life changing in that [they] change what it is like for you to be you" (Paul, 2014, p. 16). They are experiences that "revis[e] how you experience being yourself" (Ibid).

I aim to show that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience. I will argue that consciousness-raising dissolves the *prefigured* consciousness that has been structured by the interests of the ruling class. As an epistemic transformation, consciousness-raising repositions those construed as "Other" as full epistemic agents and leads to the creation of new epistemic communities in which that agent is rendered a full member. Consciousness-raising also produces a personal transformation by enabling the reconstitution of a unified self by resolving the conflict between being a person and being conceived of as an "Other."

## 4. Consciousness-Raising: Phenomenal and Epistemic

To some extent, my argument that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience turns on the claim that consciousness-raising moves us from the default standpoint to a critical standpoint. To motivate both these claims, we should begin by thinking about this default state of consciousness.

Within feminist scholarship, consciousness is usually thought of in phenomenological terms. That is, when we think of consciousness, we tend to think about the conscious experience or the internal feeling of "what it's like" to be some agent having some experience. In some sense, consciousness seems to pick out how we experience and represent reality. Sheila Ruth, for instance, writes that consciousness refers to "the whole of *the phenomenal framework in and through which* the individual receives, classifies, channels, and responds to her experiences" (1973, p. 291, emphasis mine). She later adds that "our consciousness is, from a *perceptual point of view*, our *individuated reality*" (Ibid, emphasis mine). Jennifer McWeeny, in a survey of the various states of consciousness under oppression, emphasizes the ontological structure and perspectival nature of consciousness, writing that consciousness is "*fundamentally bodily*, that is, constitutively tied, not merely to the objective body, but also to *the phenomenal body as it is lived and experienced*" (2016, p. 160, emphasis mine). Consider also Sandra Bartky (1975), who, in addressing the question, "what happens when one's consciousness is raised?" responds by developing a phenomenology of feminist consciousness.

Consciousness-raising is, consequently, theorized in terms of its phenomenological effects. As such, I'll begin with this aspect of consciousness-raising before considering why this project is necessarily epistemic.

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### 4.1. Consciousness-raising as phenomenological

The notion that consciousness is prefigured has its roots in early continental philosophy (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2012; Sartre, 1956) and can be seen in particular in the work of Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2011).[8] Oft discussed is de Beauvoir's claim that woman is not born but made (1949/2011, p. 338). Beyond the simple claim that woman is a social construction, de Beauvoir is deeply interested in how woman's consciousness is constituted. In *The Second Sex*, she distinguishes *se faire objet* from Sartre's conception of consciousness as *se faire être*, or that which is "for-itself" (*pour-soi)*. She argues that consciousness is structured by body-self and body-world relationships, and as oppression invests different bodies with different significances, oppression in turn shapes the structure of consciousness. The structure which comes to characterize woman's consciousness is what she terms *se faire objet*.

The notion of *se faire objet* emerges in de Beauvoir's discussion of the structural differences in the consciousness of the child, the girl, and the woman (Ibid. pp. 349, 408). As a "child" could denote either a boy or a girl, their consciousness is not yet structured by sexual differences; the child's body is their point of view, and this point of view constitutes their perspective. A girl, by contrast, comes to realize that "she is grasped by others as a thing"—her perspective is no longer constituted by her body alone but by how she is seen by others (Ibid. p. 376). With this realization comes the understanding that her value is tied to her ability to fulfill the desires of others. Thus, her consciousness is no longer structured purely by her body, and the point of view it affords, but by the subjectivity of others (i.e., males). Thus, for de Beauvoir, to *become* a woman (*se faire femme*) just *is* to become an instrument for another's desires (*se faire objet)*.[9] Drawing from de Beauvoir's analysis, McWeeny (2016) writes that to become a woman is to realize the kind of consciousness that is *prefigured* for her.[10] To understand the significance of prefiguration, I suggest we turn to Roland Barthes's analysis of the construction of contemporary myths and their political function in naturalizing and legitimating the values and ideals of the ruling class.

In a discussion of the role of toys, Barthes observes that toys are prefigured versions of adult objects (e.g., little kitchens, miniature construction sets, etc.). These prefigured toys do not allow children to explore, play, or create something new; rather, they serve as vehicles to prepare children (who will be gendered) for their proper role within society. As Barthes writes, "the fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, for constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of Nature" (1957/1972, p. 53 emphasis in original). Barthes means by this that these toys set a child up for what he will become, and then, once he has taken that role, his interest in it will be read as reflecting the dictates of nature, rather than as a result of the prefiguration that was determined for him.

McWeeny, deploying a similar logic, writes of the transition from childhood to girlhood, that "like the dolls that girls are taught to identify with in playtime, girls begin to relate to themselves as passive lumps of matter that are valuable insofar as they are on display for others" (2017, p. 241). McWeeny draws here from de Beauvoir's own example: "…the doll represents the whole body and, on the other hand, it is a passive thing" (De Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 348). As the girl will be taught to identify with the doll, she will come to see herself, too, as a passive thing. It is in this way that the girl comes to "make herself an object": "she is treated like a living doll" (Ibid. p. 350).

We can thus draw a line from de Beauvoir to Barthes to contemporary scholarship to make the case that the structure of a woman's consciousness is such that it is prefigured for her. As de Beauvoir argues, woman is torn between making herself for herself (*se faire être; pour-soi*) and

[8]Sartre and Merleau-Ponty write of *prereflective* or *unreflective* consciousness.

[9]For those who are marginalized, constructed as Other, their bodies mark the limits of what is possible. This is why achieving transcendence is difficult—their bodies set the limits for what they can be (e.g., wives, mothers, muses, slaves, etc.).

[10]MacKinnon seems to support such a view, writing that "the social process of being a woman is on some level the same process as that by which woman's consciousness becomes aware of itself as such and of its world" (98).

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making herself for another (*se faire objet*). Woman thus hangs, as Ruth describes it, between two contrary consciousnesses, between a woman (who is not a Person) and a Person (who is not a woman) (1973, pp. 295–296). As Ruth elaborates, to be a woman "she must also *perceive* herself as this Other…she must *see* herself not only as subordinate, but as substandard" (Ibid. p. 295, emphasis mine).[11] Ruth goes on to say that "she cannot be a woman unless she assumes…and *internalizes the assigned consciousness*" (Ibid., emphasis mine). This way of seeing one's self, *as* a woman, is in tension with seeing one's self *as* a person, as substantive personhood includes, among other things, pride and self-respect, traits incompatible with also seeing one's self as substandard, as "man gone wonky" (Ibid. pp. 295–296).

The consciousness that is prefigured for woman—that she must internalize to *become* a woman—shapes how she sees and perceives the world, and that consciousness is so structured as to confirm and reinforce her substandard positioning in the world. Thus, to become a woman goes beyond simply accepting her assigned sex role. As McWeeny (2017) writes, it means "taking on a certain bodily and cognitive comportment toward the world" (239).

It is this cognitive component that concerns us here, as I will suggest, in what follows, that consciousness-raising without this cognitive component is incomplete.

### 4.2. Consciousness-raising as epistemological

The notion that there is a cognitive component to becoming a woman suggests that how one grasps one's self—how one understands one's own experiences—is mediated by how others grasp that self. In other words, to become a woman involves more than just experiencing the world as others do; it involves *knowing* the world as others (i.e., subjects) know it. Woman, for instance, relates to herself as a thing because this is how she, under the dominant standpoint, is grasped by others.[12]

A key aspect of consciousness-raising, then, involves "[participants] experiencing how they experience themselves" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 96). The implication here is that under the dominant standpoint the marginalized are told how to make sense of their experiences. The dominant standpoint provides certain schemas, interpretive frameworks, and established meanings that then shape how the marginalized experience themselves. There is a sense, then, in which one's experiences—and the body of knowledge that results from these experiences—are mediated by this standpoint. For this reason, MacKinnon characterizes the epistemology that feminism is a response to as a self-enclosed legitimating ideology that "supports men's views of what women should think and be" (pp. 96, 100).

Consciousness-raising represents a disruption to this self-enclosure. This suggests a recursive and dialectical relationship between "thought and thing" in which each is "inextricable and reciprocally constitute[ed]" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 84). How one lives in one's body is, to some extent, determined by how that body is thought of, and how one thinks of that body in turn shapes how one lives that body. Unpacking consciousness-raising as recursive and dialectal chimes with standpoint theory's origins in Marxist thought, a theory whose method is also dialectical.

This also helps to explain the centrality of the phenomenal within feminist theorizing, as well as the imperative to "start thought from marginalized lives" (Harding, 1993, p. 56). Consciousness-raising starts with participants' lived experiences so that they can "unravel and reorder" what they "know" about their own experiences, and in so doing, "form and reform, recover and change" their meaning (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 96). It involves participants attending to, and making meaning of, their experiences in a way that differs from that prescribed by the dominant standpoint.

[11]See also McWeeny (2017, 243–4).

[12]I center women in this discussion as much of the literature is centered around feminist consciousness-raising among women. However, much of what is said here applies, more broadly, to all those constructed as Other. One lives the dominant standpoint, bodily and one must know the world through from the point-of-view of that standpoint. See Pohlhaus (2011, 717).

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Stripped of their former meaning, these experiences stand ready for new interpretations, open to new meaning, available as evidence for alternative ways of seeing and understanding the world.

What I mean to draw attention to here is that consciousness-raising goes beyond merely reconfiguring one's phenomenal being-in-the-world. It involves—requires, even—a cognitive repositioning. This change in cognitive comportment—that is, the construction of a new, critical standpoint—is an essential aspect of consciousness-raising. As Bartky argues, one can be "alive to insult and inferiority," but so long as they continue to apprehend their situation as "natural, inevitable, and inescapable," one's consciousness has not been raised (429). This suggests that without the cognitive to complement the phenomenal, one is left without any sort of epistemic footing on which to make sense of their new and growing awareness.

Thus, what is needed is a critical standpoint that can help make sense of and unify the realizations that consciousness-raising has made available. Kristen Intemann (2015) describes a standpoint as a "group consciousness that occurs through a process of transformative criticism, by reflecting on and evaluating the experiences and beliefs of the individuals that constitute an epistemic community" (264). This standpoint represents the insights of its members in that it draws on their experiences—articulated in consciousness-raising—to develop new (or redefine existing) epistemic resources; to construct new organizing and interpretational schemata; and to develop explanations of the contradictions within the social order. It is a *critical* standpoint in that it interrogates how the epistemic resources, schema, and explanations of the dominant standpoint have served to construct Others and to justify their oppression. Critical standpoints will also deploy these newly developed resources to identify problematic assumptions in the theories and frameworks developed by the dominant, as well as to articulate alternative theories and frameworks informed by this new standpoint (Ibid. p. 262).

It is this respect in which consciousness-raising emerges as a *way of knowing*. The standpoint that emerges as a result of consciousness-raising is one that takes a critical stance toward the "theories of right knowing" that have placed "knowledge beyond them" (MacKinnon, 1989, pp. 96–97, 102). These epistemologies have done so by prescribing standards of knowing (e.g., aperspectivity, distance, atomism) that Others are characterized as incapable of satisfying (Code, 1995; Fricker, 2007). By contrast, the "way of knowing" proposed by feminist theorists is one that positions those characterized as Other as fully capable of accessing facts about society "because they live in it and have been formed by it" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 98). This "way of knowing" thus eschews the highly individualized, disembodied, and detached knower of the dominant standpoint in favor of an embodied approach that makes use of diverse epistemic communities.

Consciousness-raising, then, is a process that transforms both what one knows and how one experiences one's self.

## 5. A New Self: Consciousness-Raising as Transformative

Earlier I suggested that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience. I am now in a position to make good on this claim. Consciousness-raising acts as both an epistemic and personal transformation in three critical ways. Epistemically—taking a critical stance toward the dominant standpoint facilitates access to knowledge (about one's self and social reality) that is inaccessible prior to the act of consciousness-raising. As I elaborate below, the development of this critical stance is what enables the transformation of epistemic agency. Still further, consciousness-raising facilitates the creation of new epistemic communities in which the epistemic agency of participants is affirmed. Personally—consciousness-raising transforms how participants experience themselves and acts as a path to transcendence.

### 5.1. On consciousness-raising as epistemically transformative

I suggest that consciousness-raising involves a transformation of epistemic agency. Following Kristie Dotson (2012), I will think of epistemic agency in terms of one's capacity "to participate

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in a given epistemic community," where this participation can be understood in terms of one's ability to acquire or contribute to the epistemic resources required for knowing (24). Understanding agency as having an epistemic dimension helps to make sense of the distinctively epistemic ways in which agency can be undermined (*epistemic oppression*). Viewing individuals as untrustworthy or unreliable undermines their capacity to contribute to knowledge (*testimonial injustice*). To know that one is viewed in this way can lead one to withhold or suppress what knowledge they do have (*testimonial silencing*). Internalizing false representations of one's self and one's position in the world can diminish one's capacity to acquire accurate beliefs about their own experiences (sometimes resulting in *hermeneutical injustice* and other times producing *false consciousness*).

The transformation of epistemic agency first occurs as a result of the dissolution of the prefigured consciousness that is mediated by—and provides justificatory support for—the dominant standpoint. A key element of epistemic agency, and of membership within an epistemic community, is the capacity to contribute to knowledge production, a capacity denied or severely limited by commitments of the dominant standpoint. This standpoint inhibits epistemic agency of the marginalized for two reasons. First, this standpoint precludes the possibility of knowledge from nondominant standpoints. Gaile Pohlhaus (2011), for instance, argues that dominant standpoints do not enable epistemic agents to attend to certain aspects of the world. These standpoints contain conceptual resources for knowing the world that have been developed from the perspective of dominantly situated agents. As such, these resources are ill-suited to attending to or making sense of the experiences of those at the social margins. Moreover, this standpoint makes it difficult to know what is happening or to articulate it to others (Bartky, 1975, pp. 432–433; see also Fricker, 1999 on hermeneutical injustice). Second, this standpoint constructs the marginalized in such a way that they are denied the capacity for knowing and thus denied the ability to contribute to knowledge-production. Dominant standpoints contain a set of assumptions that categorically exclude certain individuals from full epistemic membership, operating with a set of commitments that diminish the capacity of individuals to accurately know themselves or to contribute to our pool of collective epistemic resources (Dotson, 2014; Fricker, 2007; Hookway, 2010; Pohlhaus, 2011; Pohlhaus, 2020; Toole, 2019). Within a dominant standpoint, marginalized individuals are hardly full-fledged members of the epistemic community, being considered (at best) partial epistemic agents.[13]

To some extent, consciousness-raising allows for the reclamation of epistemic agency because it involves the creation of an epistemic community in which one's agency can be affirmed. This community is one that "alters the terms of validation" and "redefines what counts as verification" by building a "community frame of reference" (MacKinnon, 1989, pp. 87, 101). Within this community, one's contributions are taken seriously, subjected to scrutiny, and placed within a context in which they can be examined and connected to other, related experiences.

This critical standpoint, which emerges as a result of consciousness-raising, thus makes possible knowledge that would be foreclosed under a dominant standpoint. This standpoint draws on the insights and experiences of its participants to develop the language and resources that will help those participants accurately make sense of those experiences; it thus enables the acquisition of knowledge of one's self, and of the social world, that was not accessible before. By deconstructing the myth of woman, for instance, women come to see that "accounts of women's roles or personal qualities based on nature or biology" do not, in fact, reflect any biological imperative, but have instead served as "authoritative appeals that have shaped women according to them" (Ibid. pp. 90–91).

The construction of this epistemic community also plays a pivotal role in the personal transformation that consciousness-raising brings about.

[13]The dominantly situated may be recognized as full epistemic agents so long as they "toe the line" and speak from and for that standpoint. Their epistemic agency is weakened in cases where their experiences contradict the dominant standpoint and are not taken as evidence undermining that standpoint but instead treated as evidence of some personal failure.

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### 5.2. On consciousness-raising as personally transformative

Consciousness-raising yields a personal transformation in at least two distinct ways. First, it is through the communal aspect of consciousness-raising that participants engage in the reciprocal recognition that allows for each member to recognize themselves, and each other, as Subject. It is also because consciousness-raising enables access to greater resources that through it participants are able to affirm themselves as subjects. De Beauvoir's own analysis seems predicated on such a view. She writes that "the less [woman] exercises her freedom to understand, grasp, and discover the world around her, the less she will find its resources, and the less she will dare to affirm herself as subject" (1949/2011, p. 350).

It is the restricted access to resources that constrains epistemic agency and denies one the ability to conceive of one's self *as* a person. As MacKinnon writes, through oppression one is "systematically deprived of a self" (1989, p. 89); it is through consciousness-raising that the self is reconstituted. Recall Ruth, who writes that prior to the act of consciousness-raising, "woman hangs psychologically between two contrary consciousnesses" (1973, p. 296). Consciousness-raising brings the fractured self into unity, as it seeks to resolve the contradictions and conflicts within one's experiences, contradictions that the dominant standpoint either ignores or interprets as indicative of personal failure (Ruth, 1973, pp. 292, 296–297; MacKinnon, 1989, p. 88). As MacKinnon writes, consciousness-raising "coheres and claims" these conflicts (1989, p. 85).

Yet another way that consciousness-raising produces a personal transformation is that it provides an opportunity for the epistemic community to discover and articulate its own identity distinct from that prescribed by the dominant standpoint. This process, and the standpoint it yields, resists interpellation of the individual as constructed under the dominant standpoint and thus allows for the possibility of self-definition (Collins, 1986). This newly articulated identity will produce changes in how one experiences and relates to one's self. For instance, participants may come to understand that their rage and rebellion, characterized as biased and irrational under the dominant standpoint, is an appropriate response to their conditions (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 100).

Given the epistemic and personal effects that consciousness-raising produces, I propose we think of it as a transformative experience. And yet, one might wonder what the upshot of such an analysis is. One virtue of this account is that it helps make sense of recent calls against interpreting standpoint epistemology as a deference epistemology.

## 6. Against Pure Deference

I have argued that we ought to think of consciousness-raising as a transformative experience, one that changes who we are personally and epistemically. In so doing, it also changes what knowledge is accessible to us. The transformative nature of consciousness-raising is central in the standpoint epistemologist's project, and, as I will argue, points to tensions with recent interpretations of this epistemology as one that calls for deference.

Consider Sandra Barky, who writes that the process of consciousness-raising is animated by a project of transformation (1975, p. 430). The path to a critical consciousness, she claims, is also the path to transcendence, an opportunity to define one's self and to create meaning (Bartky, 1975, p. 429). Intemann, who observes an activistic component inherent in the project of consciousness-raising, writes that to occupy a critical standpoint entails a normative commitment to critically engage with the systems (oppressive and otherwise) that shape knowledge production (Intemann, 2015, p. 268). A critical consciousness, on her view and Bartky's, is one that is ongoing, engaged, and active, rather than terminal, passive, and inert. Consciousness-raising changes who we are and how we are positioned in the world, and in doing so places those who undergo this change in a position to know facts about the world that they did not and could not before. Consequently, to change what we know, we must change who we are.

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In considering, then, whether standpoint epistemology is one that calls for deference, we should ask whether deference produces the kind of transformation that is central to this project. I argue that it does not. In making this argument, I want to be careful to distinguish *pure deference* as my target, as well as those accounts that interpret standpoint epistemology as calling for such deference. I thus aim to leave open the possibility that *impure deference* is compatible with the standpoint project. Moreover, I allow that initial acts of deference could plausibly serve as an initial starting point for the project of consciousness-raising.

In cases of impure deference, one treats the person to whom they defer as a better-informed version of themselves. There is a presumption here that the deferrer *could* acquire the information that their "better informed" self has. By contrast, in cases of pure deference one treats the person to whom they defer as having information to which the deferrer lacks access (McGrath, 2009). Cases of pure deference are those that presuppose that the truth is, for some agent, *in principle*, inaccessible to her. A deference epistemology is one that endorses this presupposition and holds that pure deference is, in some special class of cases, required or obligatory.

There are some who read standpoint epistemology as a deference epistemology, and certain ambiguities in the standpoint literature have left open such a misreading of the view. In particular, some take the epistemic privilege thesis to imply something stronger, the *automatic* epistemic privilege thesis, or the view that merely in virtue of being socially marginalized, one has access to knowledge that is better, more accurate, or more objective (see Hekman 1997; Pinnick, 1994, 2005). This thesis finds its counterpart in the strong epistemic disadvantage thesis, which suggests that there are strong, substantive limits on what the socially dominant can know about oppression which they do not experience (Tilton, 2024). On both these theses, marginalization enables access to knowledge that is inaccessible to those who lack the relevant standing; this would entail that those who are dominantly positioned can access certain knowledge *only* by deferring to those who are marginalized.

Pearlman and Williams (2022) is representative of an account that calls for pure deference on such a basis. On their view, on matters relating to oppression, the dominant ought to defer to the marginalized because the former lack access to the information (i.e., lived experience, phenomenological experience) that is relevant for knowing (Ibid. p. 18). To fail to acknowledge that the marginalized possess epistemic authority on matters relating to oppression amounts to a form of disrespect on their view. They further imply that it would be a moral wrong, either not to defer or to defer *and* continue to engage in inquiry on the question under discussion (Ibid. pp. 12–13).

Both Tilton (2024) and Toole (2024) aim to clarify that standpoint epistemology entails neither the automatic epistemic privilege thesis nor the strong epistemic disadvantage thesis. And, Tilton and Toole (forthcoming) deny altogether that standpoint epistemology entails deference. Their argument is instructive and reveals an intuition, consistent with my own, that deference is ultimately incompatible with the standpoint project. As they argue, deference, on the basis that knowledge is inaccessible otherwise, flattens the epistemic possibilities for transformation that would allow one to satisfy the normative demand articulated by Intemann.

Among the possibilities that pure deference flattens is the development of epistemic virtues. Here, we can draw on the moral deference literature to offer an analogous argument against standpoint-as-deference. As those in this literature argue, pure deference does not facilitate the development of moral virtues that bring about the moral understanding necessary to reliably act, or believe, rightly (Hannon, 2025; Hills, 2009; Howell, 2014).

One might similarly argue that pure deference does not facilitate the development of epistemic virtues (e.g., open-mindedness, curiosity, humility). To acquire these virtues requires struggle, active and engaged inquiry, trial and error, practice and play. These virtues in turn facilitate a kind of understanding, enabling one to see connections between questions and to apply what one has learned in new and similar cases. Without these virtues, or the understanding they facilitate, one cannot meet standpoint theory's normative demand.

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I thus take it that we have at least two reasons to reject the notion that standpoint epistemology is a deference epistemology, both of which result from the preceding arguments. The first is that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience, one that changes both who we are and to what knowledge we have access. This transformation cannot be outsourced to another. The second is that knowledge produced from nondominant standpoints is accessible to those who undergo the transformation that consciousness-raising brings about. As such, standpoint epistemology does not entail a demand for pure deference.

## 7. Stay Woke

Several points worth returning to have emerged in our discussion of consciousness-raising. Drawing on the extant literature, I have argued that consciousness-raising is (1) necessarily communal (until a critical paradigm/standpoint is in place), (2) dimensional rather than categorical, and (3) an ongoing, active, and iterative practice, the aim of which is to arrive at more and more complete knowledge. Adding Paul's analysis of transformative experiences to this discussion, I further argued that consciousness-raising yields an epistemic and personal transformation. The significance of this transformation, I suggested, helps to explain pessimism toward interpretations of standpoint epistemology as a deference epistemology.

Despite the fact that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience, it is *reversible*. Recall that on my account, consciousness is phenomenally prefigured and provides justificatory support for the dominant standpoint. This relationship between "thought and thing" must be maintained. The dominant standpoint must cultivate answers when challenges to its primacy arise (Antony, 2006), by undermining alternative "ways of knowing" that threaten its status as the "one true epistemology" (Dotson, 2022) and generating evidence that supports its position as the standpoint that most accurately and objectively captures reality (Code, 1995). The dominant standpoint has the power to create facts, to make its "way of knowing" *seem* true (Antony, 2006). In short, the dominant standpoint will continue to reassert itself and to epistemically oppress resistant epistemologies (Dotson, 2018; Toole, 2019). Consciousness-raising is thus an *ongoing* practice, one that involves continuing to epistemically resist the imposition of the dominant "way of knowing." From this it follows that if one fails to maintain a raised consciousness, the work of consciousness-raising can be undone.

This claim stands in tension with Paul's account, as she describes the effects of transformative choices—like becoming a vampire—as irreversible (2014, p. 43). Edna Ullmann-Margalit (2006) likewise describes such choices and experiences as *irrevocable*, writing that "what is done cannot be undone" (2006, pp. 159–160). It is beyond the scope of this project to challenge this aspect of Paul's account, but I suspect many cases of transformative experience are reversible. At the very least, if I am right in thinking that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience and one that is reversible, this may suggest a more complicated picture of transformative experience.[14]

## 8. Conclusion

Despite the centrality of the achievement thesis within standpoint epistemology, there are gaps in the literature on the epistemic significance of consciousness-raising and its role in providing access to knowledge that was previously inaccessible. I aimed to fill these gaps by arguing that consciousness-raising is a transformative experience.

To accomplish this task, I suggested that consciousness is phenomenally prefigured and is both mediated by and provides epistemic support for the dominant standpoint. The dominant

[14]For other accounts that argue we ought to broaden our conception of transformative experiences, see Carel and Kidd (2020).

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standpoint thus shapes how we relate to ourselves as well as what we know about social reality. Consciousness-raising transforms the epistemic agent by constructing an epistemic community in which one can struggle with others to resist this standpoint and to develop a standpoint that represents the insights of its members. Consciousness-raising thus produces a change in how one experiences and perceives one's self, as well as a change in what one knows about the world.

That consciousness-raising is transformative gathers further support from the intuition that deference is incompatible with aims of standpoint epistemology. If, as standpoint theorists suggest, who we are affects what we are in a position to know, then to change what we know we must change ourselves.

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