

CHARLES R. BRASFIELD  
ANNE CUBITT,  
*Counselling Service,  
Simon Fraser University.*

### CHANGES IN SELF-DISCLOSURE BEHAVIOR FOLLOWING AN INTENSIVE "ENCOUNTER" GROUP EXPERIENCE\*

**ABSTRACT:** The present research was conducted because of concern for the paucity of studies dealing with behavioral effects of encounter groups, even though such groups are now widely known and frequently described subjectively.

From a volunteer pool of seventy-one undergraduate students willing to participate in "encounter group research" for a nominal fee, sixteen (8 male, 8 female) were selected for participation. The selection was based on a clinical interview conducted according to previously established criteria designed to identify and de-select individuals with pressing psychological conflicts. After selection, each student completed two paper-and pencil personality measures and a behavioral measure of self-disclosure. For the behavioral measure of self-disclosure, each student was asked to disclose five items of personal information to a peer stranger of the same sex and, separately, to a peer stranger of the opposite sex. Each student individually selected the self-disclosure items from a list of items provided by the experimenters. Intimacy scores for all self-disclosures were recorded.

Four male and four female students were then invited to participate in an encounter group while the other students were asked to delay their group participation until the following semester. At the end of eight weeks (and the encounter group) all sixteen students were again asked to complete the same personality and self-disclosure measures.

Pre-post comparisons were computed as well as comparisons between the encounter group and control group students. Results are discussed in terms of clinical and ethical considerations in conducting encounter groups, the format of the particular group, group leadership styles, and clinical aspects of the group process.

\*The authors wish to express their appreciation to Dr. Beatrice Lipinski and the staff of the Simon Fraser Counselling Service for their participation in the selection of volunteers and for making extra personal efforts to allow the authors sufficient "service" time to conduct the study. The Simon Fraser University Counselling Service also provided funds for payment of volunteers and confederates.

Appreciation is also extended to Mrs. Marie Richards for her efforts in administration of the psychometric measures and in typing several revisions of the present paper.

"Encounter groups," "T-groups," and "human relations groups" have become a part of contemporary culture (cf. Rogers, 1967). They are organized in private industries, universities, social service agencies, hospitals, and churches. The people participating in these groups find them exhilarating, damaging, enlightening, enjoyable, and boring — though seldom all at the same time. Encounter groups are the subject of concern to a multitude of researchers, (e.g. Campbell & Dunnette, 1968), practicing psychiatrists (e.g. Frank, 1964; Jaffe & Scherl, 1969) and reporters for women's magazines (e.g. Howard, 1970).

Encounter groups may be many things and have many effects, but they do seem to have some reward value for many individuals; thousands of people have found them sufficiently rewarding to lead them to participate in a rather large variety of such groups. Rogers (1967) suggests that one of the major rewards of encounter groups is the development of close, warm, and meaningful interpersonal relationships with other group members. His comments seem to imply that one of the major variables involved in developing such relationships is "interpersonal openness." That is, group members come to feel that they can be themselves as they are without needing to play any particular social role with other group members or conceal from the group their own feelings and reactions. Jourard's work on self-disclosure (e.g., Jourard, 1971, 1964; Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) suggests that many close and rewarding interpersonal relationships co-vary with degree of disclosure of personal information about oneself to another person. It may well be that degree of self-disclosure is one of the operative factors involved in encounter groups and their effects on individuals.

While there are obvious changes that occur to individuals during participation in an encounter group, the generalizability of such changes has been called into question by several researchers (e.g., Miles, 1965; Oshry & Harrison, 1966; Zand, Steele, & Zalkind, 1967). It therefore seemed appropriate to the present authors that pre- and post-group measures be taken with regard to actual behaviour change as well as self-report measures of attitude and self-image. Since self-disclosure is perhaps a significant factor in encounter groups, it seemed important that the investigation of self-disclosure with regard to changes following an encounter group experience should be done in an experimental setting outside of the group itself. It was expected that this procedure would yield somewhat more valid measures of changes in specific self-disclosure behavior related to encounter group experiences than would changes noted in the process of the group itself.

## METHOD

Posters were placed on the Simon Fraser University campus requesting volunteers for encounter group research who would be asked to participate in an encounter group and complete research measures. The posters specified that volunteers would be paid \$2.00

an hour for the time spent in completion of the research measures. Each potential subject was interviewed by one of four colleagues of the two investigators; any subject who exhibited a borderline adjustment of any kind (social, emotional, academic, etc.) was excluded from participation. After interviewing, each potential subject remaining was asked to complete two psychometric measures, the Adjective Check List (Gough, 1965), and the Personal Orientation Inventory (Shostrom, 1965). Markedly negative scores on either or both of these psychometric measures were also used to exclude volunteers from any further participation in the study. Of 71 volunteers, 48 were so excluded.

After eligibility for participation was determined on the basis of interview and test results, each subject was asked to participate in an experimental self-disclosure session with confederates of the investigators.

Following interview, testing, and experimental self-disclosure, eight subjects (four male and four female) were selected to participate in the encounter group while all other eligible subjects were asked to delay their participation in the encounter group until the following semester. The eight subjects selected to participate in the encounter group were those whose interviews and test protocols indicated to the investigators the greatest degree of "normalcy." Thus, the most "normal" of the eligible volunteers were asked to participate in the encounter group while 13 marginally less "normal" eligible volunteers were asked to participate in the control group. Of the control group volunteers, 5 withdrew from the study.

The procedures for selection of volunteers to participate together in an encounter group (all selected experimental volunteers in the same encounter group) were planned to be and were relatively rigorous. The purpose of the rigor was to avoid "casualties" and allow for a clear examination of the variables in encounter groups associated with self disclosure. That these relatively rigorous selection procedures were not fully effective is as much the subject of this paper as are the results of the study itself. One experimental subject (referred to as "Clarissa") was very nearly a casualty in the encounter group experience and regard for her psychological and physical well-being drastically changed the intent of the authors with regard to the style of the group process. A variety of considerations strongly suggested to the authors that it was imperative mid-way through the group to change the style from "intensive" to "supportive."

In the experimental self-disclosure, each subject was paired once with a confederate of the same sex and once with a confederate of the opposite sex. In both cases the subjects were asked to participate in a self-disclosure "game" developed by one of Jourard's students (Drag, 1968). In the "game," the subject is given a list of items of personal information, any five of which he may ask the confederate to disclose. However, if the subject requests disclosure of information on a particular item, he must also be willing to disclose his own information regarding the same item. Self-disclosure items were ranked on the basis of normative data gathered from other Simon Fraser University

students. The items of self-disclosure were drawn from Jourard's Self-Disclosure Questionnaire (1959) and supplemented by additional items composed by the senior author. The whole list of items was referred to as the Personal Information Inventory (Brasfield, 1971).

After completion of seven two-hour group sessions, each subject was again asked to participate in the experimental self-disclosure sessions, this time with different confederates of the investigators. Each subject was again paired with one confederate of the same sex and one of the opposite sex. Control-group subjects also participated in additional self-disclosure sessions in the same pattern as experimental subjects.

The self-disclosure scores used were the ranked intimacy level of each of the Personal Information Inventory (PII) items disclosed by the subjects. A mean score was developed for the disclosures that each subject made to each confederate prior to and after the encounter group or prior to and after the delay of one semester's time.

### HYPOTHESES

It was hypothesized that (1) encounter group subjects would exhibit greater willingness to disclose personal information following the encounter group than prior to encounter group. It was also hypothesized that (2) encounter group subjects would exhibit greater changes in the intimacy value of their self-disclosures over one semester's time than would the control group subjects.

### RESULTS

The mean rank of the intimacy level of items disclosed by each subject to each confederate were computed for both encounter and control group subjects prior to and after participation in the group or (in the case of the control group subjects) no further exposure to encounter groups. Analysis of variance of these data (Edwards, 1968) indicate that the mean rank of the intimacy level of the items disclosed was significantly different ( $p < .05$ ) for the encounter and control group subjects both prior to as well as after the group sessions. These data are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1  
Self-Disclosure Data of  
Encounter vs Control Groups

|            | ENCOUNTER GROUP | CONTROL GROUP |
|------------|-----------------|---------------|
| PRE-TEST   | * 19.36         | 16.39         |
| POST-TEST  | 20.28           | 16.96         |
| TOTAL MEAN | 19.82           | 16.68         |

\*Mean Rank (1-42) of intimacy level of items disclosed

TABLE 2  
Self-Disclosure Data  
Male vs. Female

|           | MALE    | FEMALE |
|-----------|---------|--------|
| PRE-TEST  | * 18.67 | 17.06  |
| POST-TEST | 20.44   | 16.81  |
| TOTAL     | 19.55   | 16.94  |

\*Mean Rank (1-42) of intimacy level of items disclosed

Analysis of variance for the data on self-disclosure also revealed a significant difference between males and females both prior to and after the experimental time. These data are displayed in Table 2 and indicate that males disclosed consistently more intimate material than did females. This finding may be contradictory to previous findings (cf., Jourard, 1971) that females disclose more material than do males.

The analysis of the self-disclosure data also revealed a significant three-way interaction between the groups and the sex of the confederate to whom disclosures were made by the time of the testing. In the pre-test, the encounter group subjects disclosed considerably less intimate material to opposite-sex confederates than same-sex confederates. This difference was less marked for the control group subjects. In the post-test, both encounter and control group subjects disclosed considerably more intimate material to opposite-sex confederates than to same-sex confederates. These data are displayed in Figure 1.

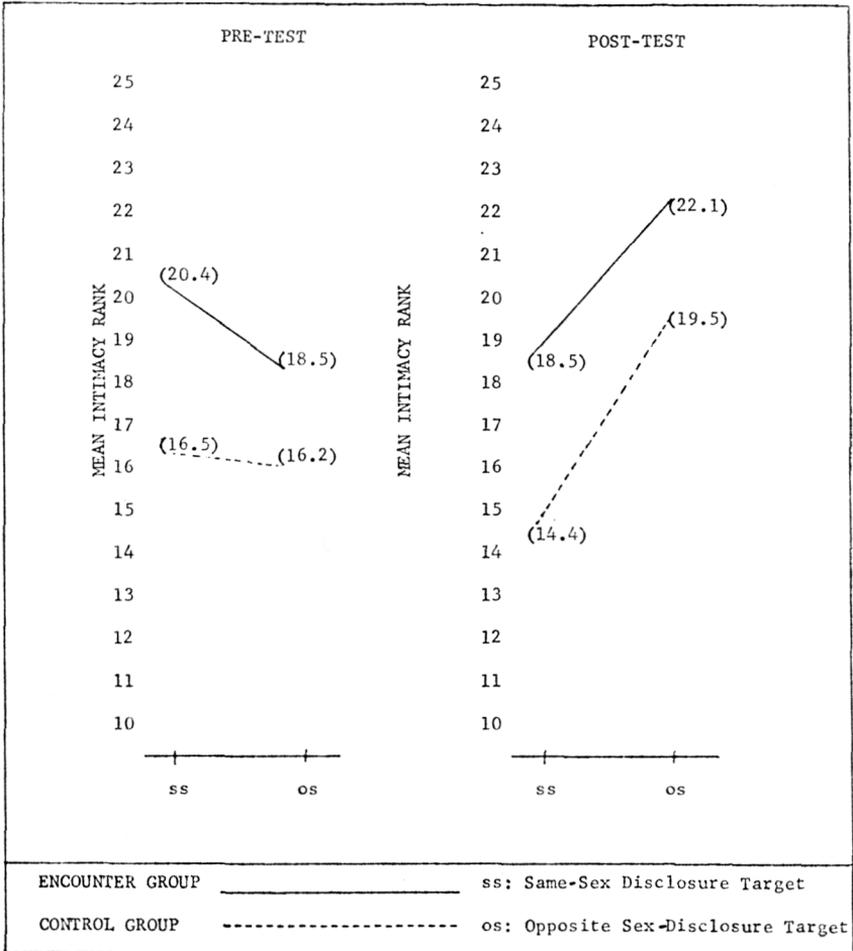
The self-disclosure data indicate that not only were the encounter and control group subjects significantly different in their self-disclosure behavior prior to the group sessions but that neither hypothesis regarding changes in self-disclosure behavior could be upheld on the basis of available data obtained in this study.

There were no significant differences between encounter and control group subjects either prior to or after on the Personal Orientation Inventory. There were, however, seven significant treatment by pre-post interactions on the Adjective Check List. The encounter group subjects declined in defensiveness, number of favorable adjectives checked, self-confidence, need for achievement, need for dominance, need for intraception, and need for affiliation. In each case the control group subjects increased on these scales.

## DISCUSSION

Inasmuch as the present research was designed with the idea of looking at one aspect of the effects of an encounter group upon students without pressing psychological conflicts, the volunteers were carefully screened. It was intended that the group would encompass

FIGURE 1  
 SELF-DISCLOSURE DATA  
 Group x Target Sex x Time



the use of a variety of encounter techniques rather than therapy for psychological disorders. At least one specific encounter technique was scheduled for every second group session, and the planned schedule was followed for the first three sessions. In the third session, a facial and hand touching exercise was conducted — during which one group member precipitously withdrew from the exercise. Due to the tremors and facial expressions exhibited by this member, she was approached individually at the end of the session but did not wish to comment upon her withdrawal from the exercise.

Three days later, this girl collapsed on campus and was taken to the University Health Service where she refused to talk with anyone but the senior group leader. When interviewed at that time, she revealed that she was currently acutely suicidal, had twice previously been hospitalized with a diagnosis of schizophrenia, and was currently in therapy with a private psychiatrist. She was also touch-phobic, which was obvious from her withdrawal from the exercise previously. She did not, however, wish to withdraw from the group and felt that it was imperative that she stay in the group.

At this point, a considerable ethical problem became apparent to the authors. The disturbed student (referred to hereafter by the pseudonym "Clarissa") was a patient of a private psychiatrist, had consistently misrepresented herself during the screening interview and the psychometric testing, and clearly did not meet the established criteria for inclusion in the encounter group. In terms of research design, Clarissa should have been required to withdraw from the group. On the other hand, she had established considerable transference toward the senior group leader, felt (albeit somewhat magically) that she *must* continue in the group, and she was suicidal. By these relatively fuzzy indices, it was apparent that Clarissa should be continued in the group and handled supportively. To make matters more difficult, she refused permission to inform her psychiatrist either of her participation in the group or her suicidal ideation. Finally, her history (as finally revealed) gave every indication that she would not be *able* to tolerate the group experience as planned.

The choice came down to either abandoning Clarissa or abandoning the plan of the group and a clean research design. After sufficient consultation, speculation, and agonizing, it was decided not to abandon Clarissa. From the third session on, very few encounter techniques were used and the group was kept at a very supportive and essentially non-confronting level. The effects of this change in group leadership style cannot be delineated on the basis of the available data, but it seems likely that the data were affected by this change.

The style, then, of this particular group, turned out to be initially "encounter" and finally "supportive therapy." Nevertheless, it would seem reasonable to expect that exposure to a small-group experience would lead to some measurable changes. In this instance, the self-disclosure data indicate that the levels of intimacy of self-disclosure of the subjects assigned to the encounter group and the control group were initially significantly different and thus not directly comparable; the levels of intimacy of self-disclosure for both groups, however, did not shift significantly. This finding would suggest that small-group experiences may not affect extra-group self-disclosure as much as might be expected.

Contrary to possible expectations from previous research (cf., Jourard, 1971) the intimacy scores for males were generally higher than were the intimacy scores for females. The present finding suggests that perhaps the quantity and the quality of self-disclosure may be

relatively separate variables inasmuch as it has previously been found (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958) that college females tend to disclose more information *per se* than do comparable males. Interestingly, both encounter and control group subjects showed marked increases of intimacy of self-disclosure to the confederates of the opposite sex over the period of the study.

The results of the Adjective Check List interactions showed decreased needs for achievement, dominance, intraception, affiliation, and abasement on the part of the encounter group subjects while the reverse was true for the control group subjects. Similar results were obtained for the adjectival self-descriptions on scales of defensiveness, self-confidence, and the relative favourability of the adjectives used to describe oneself. These results seemed to be related to the style and content of the particular group, but it is not clear that the changes on the part of the encounter group subjects can be viewed as either negative or positive. It may, for instance, be that the second adjectival self-descriptions are more accurate inasmuch as the encounter group subjects were less defensive. On the other hand, it could be suggested that the encounter group subjects became somewhat more passive and less self-confident when compared to the control group subjects.

The present study makes clear several difficulties which may be encountered in conducting research on small groups. The most obvious difficulty, at least for the present study, is the possibility of group "casualties." A recent, and much more extensive, study by Yalom and Liebermann (1971) suggests that a casualty rate of approximately 10 percent can be reasonably expected. That study further suggests that the degree of risk can be rather directly related to leadership style, which was also felt to be the case in the present study.

Additionally, the present study clearly indicates the marked difficulty encountered in selecting "normal" volunteers for participation in an encounter group. Despite extensive evaluations of all volunteers prior to their being accepted for participation in the study, one subject was accepted who did not meet the criteria for acceptance in any way.

Finally, the results of this study make very clear the importance of including a control group as part of the experimental design. For the present study, the absence of a control group would allow the interpretation that participation in an encounter group increased intimacy of self-disclosure to stranger peers of the opposite sex. This seems a reasonable outcome of participation in such a group, but exactly the same result was found for volunteers who had *not* participated in such a group. Without including a control group as a part of the experimental design, it would seem to be impossible to state just what the effects of participation in an encounter group might be.

The value of encounter groups was not a question to which the present study was addressed, but the results do suggest that this question might deserve serious consideration. Do encounter groups increase passivity, reduce defensiveness, lower needs for achievement, affiliation, etc., or do they increase accuracy of self-perceptions? What

is an appropriate measure of the outcome of encounter groups? These questions and others would seem to call for further systematic research.

**RESUME:** La présente recherche tente de combler la lacune des études portant sur les effets des groupes de rencontre ("encounter groups") sur le comportement, même si ces groupes sont maintenant bien connus et fréquemment décrits de façon subjective.

A partir d'un groupe de 71 étudiants de niveau collégial, on en a choisi 16 (8 males, 8 femelles) pour participer à une recherche sur les groupes de rencontre, moyennant une rémunération nominale. La sélection a été basée sur une entrevue clinique faite selon des critères antérieurement établis afin d'identifier et d'éliminer les individus ayant des conflits psychologiques. Après la sélection, on administra à chaque étudiant deux tests de personnalité du type papier-et-crayon ainsi qu'un instrument de mesure de révélation du soi (self-disclosure). Pour cette dernière mesure, chaque étudiant devait révéler 5 items concernant sa vie personnelle, d'abord à un pair étranger du même sexe, ensuite à un pair étranger du sexe opposé. Chaque étudiant a choisi individuellement les 5 items à révéler à partir d'une liste d'items fournie par les expérimentateurs. On a noté les cotes quant au degré d'intimité manifesté par chaque item révélé.

Huit étudiants (4 males, 4 femelles) ont été invités à participer immédiatement à un groupe de rencontre tandis qu'on a demandé aux autres étudiants d'attendre au prochain semestre. À la fin de chaque groupe (après 8 semaines) les 16 étudiants ont dû compléter les mêmes tests qu'au début de l'expérimentation.

On a établi des comparaisons pré- et post-expérimentales pour chaque groupe et entre chaque groupe. On a discuté des résultats en tenant compte des aspects cliniques et éthiques, de la nature du groupe de rencontre et des styles de "leadership" dans ces groupes.

## REFERENCES

- Brasfield, C. R. Intimacy of self-disclosure, availability of reaction to disclosure, and formation of interpersonal relationships. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1971.
- Campbell, J. P., & Dunnette, M. D. Effectiveness of T-group experiences in managerial training and development. *Psychological Bulletin*, 1968, 70, 73-104.
- Drag, L. R. Experimenter-subject interaction: A situational determinant of differential levels of self-disclosure. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Florida, 1968.
- Edwards, A. L. *Experimental design in psychological research*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968.
- Frank, J. Training and therapy. In L. P. Bradford, J. R. Gibb, & K. D. Benne, (Eds.) *T-group theory and laboratory method*. New York: Wiley, 1964.
- Gough, H. G. *The Adjective Check List Manual*. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1965.
- Howard, J. Encounter groups. *Vogue*, June, 1970.

- Jaffe, S. L., & Scherl, D. J. Acute psychosis precipitated by T-group experiences. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1969, 21, 442-448.
- Jourard, S. M. Self-disclosure and other-cathexis. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1959, 59, 428-431.
- Jourard, S. M. *The transparent self*. Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1964.
- Jourard, S. N. *Self-disclosure: An experimental analysis of the transparent self*. Toronto: Wiley, 1971.
- Jourard, S. M., & Lasakow, P. Some factors in self-disclosure. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 1968, 56, 91-98.
- Miles, M. B. Changes during and following laboratory training: A clinical-experimental study. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 1965, 1, 215-242.
- Oshry, B. I., & Harrison, R. Transfer from here-and-now to there-and-then; Changes in organizational problem diagnosis stemming from T-group training. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 1966, 2, 185-198.
- Rogers, C. R. The process of the basic encounter group. In J.F.T. Bugental (Ed.) *Challenges of humanistic psychology*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967.
- Shostrom, E. L. *Manual for the personal orientation inventory*. San Diego: Education and Industrial Testing Service, 1965.
- Yalom, I. D., & Liebermann, M. A. A study of encounter group casualties. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 1971, 25, 16-30.
- Zand, D. E., Steele, F. I., & Zalkind, S. S. The impact of an organizational development program on perceptions of interpersonal, group, and organizational change. Symposium presented at meeting of The impact of using different laboratory methods for interpersonal and organizational change. Symposium presented at meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., 1967.