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ENCOUNTER GROUPS

The intensive group experience, Carl Rogers (1970) has suggested, is one of the most powerful and rapidly spreading social inventions of this century. The intensive group experience goes by many names: encounter group, sensitivity group, T-group, self-analytic group, personal growth group, marathon group, Synanon group, survival group, Recovery Incorporated, etc. Despite real differences in format and procedures which characterize the different groups, most do share certain common features: their small size (six to twenty members) allows face-to-face interaction; focus is on here-and-now behavior as it unfolds in the group; spontaneous emotional expression is encouraged; openness, self-disclosure, honesty and inter-personal confrontation are group values; participants are not labelled "patients"; and most groups strive to increase personal awareness and change outward behaviors. For convenience of expression and without intending to ignore genuine differences between various groups, in the rest of this essay I will use the terms *encounter group*, *small group*, and *intensive group experience* interchangeably.

Group leaders (often called facilitators or trainers) use diverse procedures: talking, silence, creative movement and dance, role-playing, dramatic techniques, exercises in imagination, sensory stimulation and deprivation, massage, craft work and artistic expression, just to mention a few of the more widely used methods. Group leaders are drawn from many professional and lay groups: psychiatry, social work, psychology, education, ministry, and creative disciplines such as art, music, dance and writing. Some group leaders have no professional or institutional affiliation.

Group meetings (sessions, workshops, institutes) may last as briefly as an hour, continue over many hours, take up an entire weekend or even last for weeks. The majority of group members are young and middle-aged adults from middle and upper-class backgrounds. Some groups are made up of total strangers, others are for married couples; professionals such as engineers and physicians are frequent group members as well as bored housewives, harassed businessmen and the identity-searching young. While group goals vary from entertainment to the development of a highly refined personal skill or even a different life style, most groups value *change*: change in behavior, change in values, a changed way of being in the world.

The basic encounter group, mainly through the use of talk and silence, emphasizes personal growth and improvement of interpersonal communication and relationships. Experiential learning is encouraged through personal sharing and feedback. The T-group (T is for training) is a two week human relation skills laboratory designed to enable a participant to learn about himself, others, groups, the working or organizations, and to "learn how to learn." *Body and sensory awareness groups* stress physical awareness and expression through the use of movement, dance, massage, concentration, and

sensory stimulation and deprivation. *Sensitivity groups* usually combine elements of the encounter group, T-group, and sensory awareness groups. *Gestalt groups* utilize a Gestalt therapeutic approach with a "therapist" focussing on one person at a time from a diagnostic point of view. The leader in a Gestalt group usually plays a more prominent part than in many other groups. *Synanon* groups were originally developed by the Synanon organization to treat drug addiction. Several Synanon communities are now in existence in California. Synanon groups function to change unwanted behaviors, to develop honest, straightforward relations and to develop new life styles. Synanon "games" may seem highly abrasive to the uninitiated and employ direct, unrelenting attacks on the defences and self-defeating behaviors of group members.

Growth centers are a highly visible index of the encounter group movement. At last count there were over one hundred such centers scattered throughout the United States, Canada, Mexico, England, and Japan. Esalen at Big Sur, California, is the best known growth center; well over fifty-thousand persons have now participated in group sessions at Esalen. While the growth centers are not presently confederated, center directors began meeting annually in 1969 to discuss programs, the sharing of leaders, funding, fees and other common interests.

Why so many small groups? What factors seem to explain the rapid emergence of the intensive small group experience? Throughout history small groups have appeared in times of social disruption and change, when values were thrown into doubt. As people achieve a firm basis of literacy and material possession dissident groups arise around the issues of hypocrisy and discrepancy between values and behavior. Moreover, groups have always performed *healing* functions: supplying hope, morale, emotional support, protection, a sense of security and intimacy.

The contemporary surge of small group life seems to have arisen in response to pressing personal needs which are going unmet in ordinary daily living. Essential human needs for intimacy, support, realness and belonging do not change much. The situation people live in *does* change—our present rapid societal change is in the direction of being less liveable. Increasingly, people move around breaking ties with family, neighborhood, friends, family doctor, church and working associates. In short, sources of intimacy and belongingness are drying up. This, of course, without any reduction in the need of the individual for affection, acceptance, stability and intimacy. Modern family life, school life and work life stress efficiency, productivity, competition and require a restricted range of acceptable social behavior—factors which further oppose the individual's need for stability, belongingness and intimacy.

In contrast to the impersonality, social distance and separation which characterize contemporary family, school, and work life, the encounter group offers intimacy, confirmation, and belongingness. A group provides the person with an opportunity to grow and affirm himself in relation to others. In the words of one encounter group member, "lots of people with no symptoms at all are dying" Many people hunger for genuine interaction, honest feedback and shared feelings of closeness. For young participants the small group is a safe place to explore confusion about roles, values and personal identity. For older adults, the small group is a social oasis where facades

and societal restrictions can be shed. For all it is a place where loneliness can be replaced with shared, intimate fellowship.

Education is clearly implicated in the encounter group movement. Birnbaum (1969) has pointed out that the intensive group experience, when properly employed, can produce substantial educational change both in individuals and in organizations. As a potent experiential learning procedure, the small group is capable of creating a revolution in instruction by helping teachers to better utilize the *classroom group* for learning. For some years Robert Bales and colleagues have worked at Harvard University to develop an educational learning group for adults called the *self-analytic group* (1970). The aim of the self-analytic group is to achieve an understanding of individual behavior and self; and to "develop values, norms, leadership, emotional resources, and a theoretical point of view which makes further effective analysis possible, as a cooperative process" (pp. 523-524).

With prevention of later difficulties in mind, Bessel and Palomares (1970) have developed a series of group experiences suitable for children. They provide conditions for children to *learn* interpersonal skills, to *learn how* to share experiences and to *learn* and *develop* confidence, social awareness, and understanding. George Brown (1970) has reported on the Ford Foundation-Esalen project to humanize education at all levels of schooling—a project which made extensive use of the intensive group experience. Eugene Gendlin (1970) forecasts that "we are close to the time when every school system will teach skills of personal problem solving and helpful interacting to everyone . . ." (p. 553), much as writing, reading, and physical skills are now taught.

Psychiatry is clearly involved in the encounter group movement: psychiatrists themselves are group participants and leaders, their patients are often group members, and many of the procedures used by encounter group facilitators overlap the procedures of group psychotherapy. The relevance of encounter groups for psychiatry has been officially recognized by the American Psychiatric Association's task force report on *Encounter Groups and Psychiatry* (1970). Briefly stated, the report lists the following implications of the group movement for psychiatry:

1. Encounter groups aim at behaviour change, personal growth, and often employ techniques overlapping with psychotherapy;
2. Participation in encounter groups by psychiatrists both as group members and as leaders is on the increase;
3. Numerous individuals receiving psychiatric treatment are also members of encounter groups. The interplay of the two experiences may significantly effect the person either positively or adversely;
4. Psychiatrists are often cited as authorities on encounter groups when in fact there has usually been nothing in their residency to prepare them to act in a capacity of authority on growth groups;
5. Technical innovations by encounter group leaders may be applicable to therapy groups. Sensitivity training procedures have already contributed significantly to group psychotherapy.

In summarizing the implications of encounter groups for psychiatry, the report emphasized: 1) the small group field is rapidly expanding, 2) it clearly interfaces with mental health, 3) it is based on a solid foundation, 4) it is well established and will not fade away, and 5) it is in the best interests of both psychiatrists *and* their patients to "foster a research approach

to the understanding and application of the intensive group experience" (p. 25). Moreno (1953) first used the term "group therapy" in about 1920. He had been preceded in practice of group therapy methods by Joseph Hershey Pratt, a Boston internist, who undertook group procedures to treat the psychological aspects of tuberculosis in 1905. A New Britain, Connecticut workshop in 1946 under the guidance of the renowned social psychologist, Kurt Lewin, gave birth to the T-group. Since 1950 the development of both group therapy and encounter (including T-groups) groups has been rapid, at times parallel and at time overlapping. The current relationship between the two fields has been recently examined by Yalom (1970), who points out that the therapy group is "a method for effecting therapeutic change in individuals" rather than being primarily "a vehicle for human closeness and contact" (p. 385).

Counselors in increasing numbers are being educated in group methods. Nearly all graduate training programs in counseling now provide the counselor-in-training with experience both as an encounter group member and as a facilitator. The increased interest in how encounter group methods can be applied in counselling settings is reflected in a major report on the encounter group which was published in a recent issue of *The Counseling Psychologist* (2, 1970). It seems likely that the influence of counselors trained in small group methods will become increasingly apparent in schools and universities as well as in community agencies such as mental health clinics, rehabilitation centers, YW-YWCA's and churches. Beyond the training and practice of professional counselors, a recent development in the field of counseling and therapy has been the advent of lay-counseling groups. Persons involved in this healthy effort to "bring counseling to the people" are using small group methods for both training and delivery of service.

The dangers of intensive group experience are much discussed but little known. It is fairly well established that T-group procedures have a highly beneficial effect on some individuals, no apparent effect on others, and are upsetting in the extreme for some. The same statement, however, can be made about virtually every kind of human interaction. About the only generalization which can be made at this point is that the group experience can be dangerous for *some* individuals, in the hands of *some* leaders. The safety of an encounter group is certainly directly related to the skill and sensitivity of the leader. Just how to determine or insure this sensitivity is enigmatic, given the present state of knowledge. Both informed psychiatric authorities (APA, 1970, p. 17) and psychological authorities (Corsini, 1970, p. 32) recognize the extreme diversity of the encounter group field and caution against hasty evaluation. Beyond these considerations, it must be recognized that, in large part, the small group movement has grown out of the people in response to the needs of people. It has never been under the direct influence of any professional group or institution, it is not now, nor does it seem likely that it will be in the foreseeable future. After much agonizing, the National Training Laboratories (1969) issued a set of standards to be used as guide lines for their institute programs. Other professional organizations are currently working on statements of standards for their own membership to be used in group work.

In conclusion, what is presently needed is for thoughtful, interested persons to continue an examined approach to the understanding and use of

the intensive group experience. It has powerful implications for education, psychiatry, counseling—for everyday people. We are living in a difficult time with withering sources for caring, intimate fellowship. It is truly pathetic that many persons either remain profoundly lonely or else have to plead sick (get therapy) or have (or pretend) a hobby interest in order to belong to a group. We are, I believe, moving in disparate ways toward Gendlin's (1970) prediction that one day soon,

we will provide people with a quiet closed group in which they can move in depth, tell how things are, share life, so to speak, perhaps say little at times, perhaps do major therapeutic work when needed, but always with a sense of belonging, the anchoring which a group provides (p. 557).

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