

by Carl Rogers
COMMUNITY:

The Group

COMES OF AGE The grand master takes a long, probing look into the record of group therapy—where it is going, how it works, what it can do—the anger, the agony, conflict and caring, despair and discovery, ecstasy and liberation, passion, drama and danger.

IN THE RICH, WILD, NEW TAPESTRY that is the intensive group experience one looks in vain for reliable or familiar designs. If such exist, we remain a good stout distance from discerning them.

It would, in fact, be surprising—and perhaps worse—if we were all that sure all this soon about what they are, because the group experience is so new. It is a potent new cultural development, an exciting social invention, a truly grass roots movement that has grown out of personal, organizational and social need. Unrecognized by any major university, without backing from foundations or government agencies until the last few years, it has grown until it has permeated every part of the country and almost every social institution.

All in less than 25 years. So instead of searching this tapestry for designs, we do well to seek recurrent threads and at most some small patterns. We must depend on naturalistic observation. I have detected some patterns, but most of what I will describe is based on my own experience, on observation of a limited number of other facilitators, on study of recorded group sessions, diaries, comments and participants' letters—material obtained both during and after encounter-group experiences.

In this material I believe I see certain threads that weave in and out of the very complex interactions that arise in 20, 40, 60 or more hours of intensive sessions. Some of these trends or—tendencies are more likely

to appear early, some later, but there is no clear-cut sequence in which one ends and another begins.

I deal primarily with groups in which interaction is basically verbal rather than physical, but this forms a rough description of what occurs in the great majority of T-groups, encounter groups, sensitivity-training groups, couples' groups, and the like.

Milling Around. As the leader or facilitator makes it clear at the outset that this is a group with unusual freedom for which he will not take directional responsibility, there tends to develop a period of initial confusion, awkward silence, polite surface interaction, mild to extreme frustration, and great lack of continuity. One person says: *What we need is an agenda.* This suggestion may be eagerly taken up by some, completely ignored by others. A member volunteers to serve as temporary chairman. The most likely response is that he will be ignored. Another person may present some intellectual problem in which he is quite sure the group must be as interested as he is. He is unlikely to get anything like a unanimous response.

Particularly striking to the observer is the lack of continuity between personal expressions. Individual A will present some proposal or concern, clearly looking for a response from the group. Individual B has obviously been waiting for his turn and starts out on some completely different tangent as though he had

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never heard A. One member makes a simple suggestion - *I think we should introduce ourselves* - that may lead to several hours of highly involved discussion in which the underlying issues appear to be: who is the leader? who is responsible for us? who is a member of the group? what is the purpose of the group?

Not infrequently, much of the frustration is taken out on the leader: *You're the expert, why don't you tell us what to do? You certainly know what we are expected to do. What do you want from us? An example comes from a recorded account by Thomas Gordon of an early session with a group of delinquents. One adolescent shouts at the leader: You will be licked if you don't control us right at the start. You have to keep order here because you are older than us. That's what a teacher is supposed to do. If he doesn't do it we will cause a lot of trouble and won't get anything done.* Then, referring to two boys in the group who were scuffling, he continues: *Throw 'em out. Throw 'em out. You've just got to make us behave.*

Resistance. In the milling period some individuals are likely to reveal some rather personal attitudes—toward themselves, toward persons outside the group, and sometimes toward members of the group or the group experience itself. This tends to develop ambivalence in the group. Many individuals are frightened by emotional attitudes and feelings; they tend to shut them out of awareness. Thus it is most common in an early group session for a member to express something that has emotional significance for himself and to find it ignored by the other members.

This resistance can become active. One man started to express the concern he felt about an impasse with his wife. Another member stopped him, saying essentially: *Are you sure you want to go on with this or are you being seduced by the group into going further than you want to go? How do you know the group can be trusted? How will you feel about it when you go home and tell your wife what you have revealed, or will you decide to keep it from her? It just isn't safe to go further.* Clearly in his warning this second member expressed his own fear of revealing

himself and his own lack of trust in the group.

Recalled Feelings. In spite of ambivalence about the trustworthiness of the group and the risk of exposing one's self, members do express feelings. The executive tells how frustrated he feels by certain situations in his work. A housewife describes the problems she has with her children. A nun tells how angry she becomes at one of the people with whom she works.

In the early sessions, these statements of feelings and self-revealing attitudes deal with the past or with situations outside the immediate group. Relationships within the group are not yet considered safe enough to be discussed; indeed, many participants may be unaware of their reactions toward other members.

Lashing Out. Curiously enough, the first expression of a genuinely significant here-and-now feeling is likely to crop up as a negative attitude toward another group member or toward the group leader. In one group, members introduced themselves at some length but one woman refused, saying that she preferred to be known for what she was in the group and not in terms of her status outside. Very shortly after this, one of the men in the group attacked her vigorously and angrily for this stand; he accused her of failing to cooperate with the group, keeping herself aloof, being reluctant to be a member. It was the first personal, current feeling that reached the open.

In a session of high-school faculty and students, one of the students told the principal: *I like so many of the things you do but when you try to tell us what we should do, I certainly don't like that.* In other instances individuals are attacked because of the category into which they fall. A man from industry may be told, I don't like businessmen. A minister or priest may be attacked because of the connotations his calling has for one of the participants.

Why are negatively toned feelings the first to be expressed? One speculates that this is one of the best ways to test the group's freedom and trustworthiness. Is it really a place where I can be and express myself,

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even negatively? Is this *really* a safe situation, or will I be punished? Another quite different reason is that deeply positive feelings are much more difficult and dangerous to express than negative ones. The person who expresses affection is vulnerable and open to rejection that can be devastating. A person who attacks another is at worst liable to be attacked, and he can usually defend himself. Whatever the reasons, such negatively toned feelings tend to be the first here-and-now material to appear.

Revealing Self. It may seem puzzling that what is most likely to follow such negative experiences is that a member will reveal himself to the group in a significant way. The reason no doubt is that the member has come to realize that this is in part *his* group. He can help to make of it what he wishes. He has also observed that negative feelings have been expressed and usually been accepted or assimilated without catastrophic results. He realizes there is freedom here, albeit risky freedom. As Jack Gibb has observed, a climate of trust is beginning to develop. So the member gambles; he lets the group know some deeper part of himself. One man tells of the trap in which he finds himself, feeling that communication between himself and his wife is hopeless. A priest expresses the anger that he has bottled up; he has suffered unreasonable treatment at the hands of a superior. A scientist at the head of a large research department finds the courage to speak of his painful isolation, to tell the group that he has never had a friend. By the time he finishes his account he is shedding some of the tears of sorrow for himself that he has held in for many years. A psychiatrist tells of the guilt he feels because of the suicide of his patient. A woman of 40 tells of her absolute inability to free herself from the grip of her mother. It has begun—the process that one workshop member has called "a journey to the center of self." It is often a painful process.

An example of such exploration is found in a statement by Sam, a member of a one-week workshop. A participant had spoken of Sam's inner strength.

SAM: *Perhaps I'm not aware of or experiencing it*

that way, as strength. (pause) I think, when I was talking with, I think it was the first day I was talking to you, Tom, when in the course of that, I expressed a GENUINE SURPRISE I felt, the first time I realized that I could FRIGHTEN someone ... It really ... it was a discovery that I had to just kind of look at and feel and get to know, you know, it was such a NEW experience for me. I was so used to, ah, the feeling of being frightened by OTHERS that it had never occurred to me that anyone could be—I guess it NEVER HAD—that anyone could be frightened of ME. And I guess maybe it has something to do with how I feel about myself.

He is starting to perceive a new facet or new dimension of himself.

If the beginnings of trust have developed in the group then the individual finds that these expressions about himself are accepted and that he himself is accepted more deeply because he has revealed them.

Here-and-Now Trust. Sometimes earlier, sometimes later, comes the explicit expression of one member's here-and-now feelings about another. This is a reaction to the person as a person, not to his category. Examples would be:

I feel threatened by your silence.

You remind me of my mother with whom I had a tough time.

I took an instant dislike to you the first moment I saw you.

To me you're like a breath of fresh air in the group.

I like your warmth and your smile.

I dislike you more every time you speak up.

Each of these attitudes can be and usually is explored in the increasing climate of trust.

Healing Capacity. A striking aspect of any intensive group experience is the manner in which group members show a natural and spontaneous capacity for dealing in a helpful, facilitative and therapeutic manner with the pain and suffering of others. This shows up so often in groups that I am led to believe that healing ability is far more common than we might suppose. In order to come into play it frequently needs only the permission granted by a free-flowing group experience. Individuals totally untrained in the helping relationship often exhibit a

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sensitive capacity to listen, an ability to understand the deeper significance of some of the attitudes expressed, and a warmth of caring that are truly helpful.

Self-Change. Many people feel that self-acceptance must stand in the way of change. Actually, in these group experiences, as in psychotherapy, it is a *beginning* of change.

Some examples of the accepting attitudes: *I AM a dominating person who likes to control others. I do want to mold these individuals into the proper shape. And I really have a hurt and overburdened little boy inside of me who feels very sorry for himself. I AM that little boy in addition to being a competent and a responsible manager.*

In one group, reported on by Gordon Hall, a man kept a diary of his reactions. Here is his account of an experience in which he came really to accept his almost abject desire for love. He describes how, between sessions, "I was almost compulsively going around to people starting a conversation. I had a begging kind of feeling like a very cowed little puppy, hoping that he will be patted and half afraid he'll be kicked. Finally back in my room I lay down and began to know that I was sad. Whenever someone walked by the door I would come to attention inside the way a dog pricks up his ears and I would feel an immediate wish for that person to come in and talk to me. I realized my raw wish to receive kindness." His acceptance of this pleading aspect of himself marked the beginning of a very significant experience of change.

As might be expected, this acceptance of self leads to a feeling of greater realness and authenticity. It appears that the individual is learning both to accept and to be himself and thus is laying the foundation for change. He is closer to his own feelings; hence they are no longer so rigidly organized, and are more open to change.

Cracking Masks. As the sessions continue, different threads interweave and overlap. One of these threads is the increasing impatience with defenses. In time, the group finds it unbearable that any member should live behind a mask or a front. Polite words, intellectual understanding of each other

and of relationships, the smooth coin of tact and cover-up-amply satisfactory for interactions outside—are just not good enough. The expression of self by some members of the group has made it very clear that a deeper and more basic encounter is possible and the group seems to strive intuitively and unconsciously toward this goal. Gently at times, almost savagely at others, the group demands that the individual be himself, that his current feelings not be hidden and that he remove the mask of ordinary social intercourse. In one group there was a highly intelligent and quite academic man who had been rather perceptive in his understanding of others but who had revealed himself not at all. The attitude of the group was finally expressed sharply by one member when he said, *Come out from behind the lectern, Doc. Stop giving us speeches. Take off your dark glasses—we want to know YOU.*

This refusal to accept a facade can lead the group to be critical—sometimes it can be violently attacking, as is frequently true in Synanon groups that rip the drug addicted person's defenses to shreds. On the other hand, the group can also be sensitive and gentle. The man who was accused of hiding behind the lectern was deeply hurt by the attack; during the lunch hour he looked troubled, as though he might break into tears at any moment. When the group reconvened the members sensed this and treated him most gently, enabling him to tell us his own tragic personal story, which accounted for his aloofness and his intellectual and academic approach to life.

Feedback. In this freely expressive interaction, the individual quickly gets insights into how he appears to others. The hail-fellow-well-met discovers that others resent his exaggerated friendliness. The executive who weighs his words carefully and speaks with heavy precision may find that others regard him as stuffy. A woman who shows a somewhat excessive desire to help others is told crisply that some group members do not want her for a mother. All this can be decidedly upsetting, but as long as it comes in a context of group caring it seems highly constructive.

Confrontation. There are times when the term feedback is far too mild to describe the interactions that take place, when it is better said that one

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individual confronts another. Such confrontations can be positive but frequently they are quite negative. In one of the last sessions of a group, Alice had made some quite vulgar and contemptuous remarks about John, who was, entering religious work. The next morning, Norma, who had been a very quiet person in the group, took the floor, saying: *Well, I don't have any respect for you Alice. None! First of all, if you wanted us to respect you then why couldn't you respect John's feelings last night? Why have you been after him today? Why in the hell do you have to keep digging at him? is it because of your weakness? You're not a real woman to me. Thank God you are not my mother!! I'm just shaking, I'm so mad at you. I don't think you've been real once this week. I'm so infuriated that I want to come over and beat the hell out of you! I want to slap you across the mouth.*

It may surprise or relieve the reader to know that these two women came to accept each other before the end of the session—not completely, but with much more understanding. But this was a confrontation.

Helping Outside. Group members help each other in and outside the group. One member will listen and talk for hours to another member who is undergoing a painful new perception of himself. This help takes many forms; it continues outside the group the healing capacity that flowers within the group.

Basic Encounter. Individuals come into much closer and more direct contact with each other in groups than they do in ordinary life. This appears to be one of the most central, intense, and change-producing aspects of a group experience.

Consider the mother with several children who describes herself as "a loud, prickly, hyperactive individual" whose marriage was on the rocks and who felt that life was just not worth living. She had been ". . . looking forward to the workshop with my last few crumbs of hope." She tells of her experiences in the group when she writes to another participant: ". . . The real turning point for me was a simple gesture on your part of putting your arm around my shoulder one afternoon after I had made some crack about the fact that no one could cry on your shoulder. In my notes I had written the night before, 'there is no man

in the world who loves me.' You seemed so genuinely concerned that day that I was overwhelmed. I *received* the gesture as one of the first feelings of acceptance of *me*—just the dumb way I am, prickles and all—that I have ever experienced. I have felt needed, loving, competent, furious, frantic, everything and anything but just plain *loved*. You can imagine the flood of gratitude, humility and release that swept over me. I write with considerable joy, 'I actually felt *loved*.'" Such "I-Thou" relationships (to use Martin Buber's term) occur with some frequency in these group sessions and seldom leave the participants dry-eyed. These encounters are so fully experiential that it is difficult to convey their closeness and one-ness.

Positive Closeness. Inevitably when feelings are brought into the open and are accepted in a relationship, then a great deal of closeness and positiveness results. One person says, "The incredible fact experienced over and over by members of the group was that when a negative feeling was fully expressed to another the relationship grew and the negative feeling was replaced by a deep acceptance for the other. *I can't STAND the way you talk!* turned into a real understanding and affection for you, *the way you talk.*" Thus warmth and group spirit and trust grow out of a realness that includes both positive and negative feelings.

Behavior Modified. Often one's behavior changes in the group itself. Gestures change. The tone of voice changes, sometimes stronger, sometimes softer—usually more spontaneous, less artificial, more feelingful. Individuals show astonishing thoughtfulness and helpfulness toward each other. Physical movements and postures relax.

The behavior changes that come after the group experience are more important. Here is how one fellow sees himself: "I am more open, spontaneous. I express myself more freely. I am more sympathetic, empathic and tolerant. I am more confident. I am more religious in my own way. My relations with my family, friends and co-workers are more honest and I express my likes and dislikes and true feelings more openly. I admit ignorance more readily. I am more cheerful. I want to help others more." A bit pat,

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perhaps, but not atypical.

Gradations of Change. After a satisfying experience in an encounter group, what is most likely to change is the participant's attitude toward *himself*. Changes in his close personal relationships come second: He tends to open up and be spontaneous with members of his family—his wife, his children—and his close friends. Change is also likely in those areas in which he feels potent. Thus the teacher who feels responsible for his class may change quite markedly in his relationship to the class and its members. Change appears a little less marked in peer relationships. Behavior with co-workers may change but this is not quite as probable as other changes. Relationships with superiors may change but this depends greatly upon the attitude and maturity of the superiors. Changes seem to be slowest in organizational structure and procedures, even when a number of members of the organization have engaged in encounter groups.

The Data. None of the research studies on outcomes of group experience is a masterpiece of precision. Most have found some changes in self concept, in attitudes, and in behavior, and a reasonable number of these changes persist over time. A very simple questionnaire study that I conducted found similar results. Four hundred eighty-one persons (82 per cent of those queried) responded, most of them three to six months after their experiences in encounter groups led by people with whom I was closely connected. Two felt that the experience had been mostly damaging and had changed their behavior in ways they did not like. A moderate number felt that the experience had been rather neutral or had made no perceptible change in their behavior. A number felt that it had changed their behavior, but that this change had largely disappeared. The overwhelming majority felt that it had been constructive in its results or a deeply meaningful positive experience that had made a continuing positive difference in their behavior.

Upsetness. An elementary-school principal whom I shall call Margaret, a member of a group in which she and all of her teachers had been involved, writes: ". . . It has taken me a while to be able to respond in

writing to our sensitivity workshop. When I returned to school that following morning everyone really seemed shot—yet I wonder if it wasn't one of our best teaching days. The teachers seemed so aware of their children as people. I think, too, that socially the faculty has become much more aware of each other. Everyone seems to be trying to get to know each other more, not as fellow workers but as human beings.

"Oh. Another reaction just zoomed up. I remember that Monday morning—I must have had 25 different feelings in an hour but most of all I was scared—for the first time I was going to school as Margaret the person instead of Margaret the principal. It was a *freeing* feeling too! and I survived!

"The strength that you all gave me is still very vivid in my feelings and I am also trying to soak up the idea that Margaret is a lovable and loving person."

This letter gives the flavor of many typical outcomes: the upsetness that customarily accompanies change in self; the greater awareness of feelings and reactions; the realization that old roles are no longer satisfying; the risk of being more of one's self; the continuing assimilation of feedback from the group.

Much the best designed and most interesting study of the process in encounter groups is the one made by Betty Meador. It was based on a group that met for five sessions in one weekend for a total of 16 hours, all filmed. There were eight members and two facilitators. From the filmed account Meador selected, in a standardized and unbiased way, 10 two-minute segments for each individual—one from the first half and one from the second half of every session. Thus she had 10 two-minute film segments for each individual, 80 in all. The 10 for each individual were spliced in random order, not sequentially. Thirteen raters then looked at every segment without knowing whether they were looking at an early or late segment. (In fact, the raters had no knowledge whatever about the group.)

The raters used Rogers' Process Scale, devised by Richard Rablen and myself, a seven-stage scale representing a continuum of psychological activity

ranging from a rigidity and fixity of feelings, of communication of self, of ways of construing experience, of relationships to people, of relationship to one's problems, to a flow and changingness and spontaneity in these same areas. It was on this Process Scale that the judges rated the 80 filmed segments. The ratings were made in an unbiased and objective manner. It was not easy for them to make the ratings since the Process Scale was designed originally as a measurement of process in individual therapy and they did not feel at all secure in the ratings they were making. Analysis of their ratings showed, however, that there was a satisfactory degree of reliability in that they did tend to rate the segments in reasonably similar fashion.

The findings were impressive. Every one of the eight individuals in the group showed a significant degree of process movement toward greater flexibility and expressiveness. He became closer to his feelings, was beginning to express feelings as they occurred, was more willing to risk relationships on a feeling basis. These qualities had not been characteristic of the group initially. As Meador says in describing her research, "It is apparent that these individuals, initially strangers, obtained a level of relating to each other not characteristic of ordinary life." This study gives us a solid picture of at least one facet of the group process as it occurs in an encounter group.

Risks. I have tended to describe the intensive group experience in positive terms. The evidence at hand indicates that it is nearly always a positive process for a majority of the participants. There are nevertheless negative aspects. The most obvious deficiency is that frequently the changes in behavior, if any, are not lasting. Ways are being discovered to extend such effects. If for example, a number of people come from one organization or one community or one professional group working together, the likelihood of continued reinforcement from each other is decidedly enhanced.

Another risk is that an individual may become deeply involved in revealing himself but then be left with problems that are not worked through. There are also occasional accounts of an individual's having a psychotic episode during or immediately after an intensive-group experience. Preventive steps are being taken. There is clearly a need for almost immediate followup of any encounter-group experience to let people further work through any unresolved conflicts. This may be done by drawing the group together for a follow-up experience or it

may be through contacts with individual participants. As for psychotic breaks, individuals have been observed living through these episodes very constructively in the context of encounter groups. The tentative clinical judgment has been made that the more positively the group process has been proceeding, the less likely it is that any individual will be psychologically damaged in any permanent way through membership in the group. However, this is a serious issue, and much more needs to be known.

Another deficiency often noted is that when only a husband or a wife is involved in an encounter group, the development of one spouse toward flexibility and growth may be quite threatening and disturbing to the other spouse. This effect has been one of the main motives for the development of couples' groups.

Very closely related is the fact that in mixed intensive workshops positive and warm, loving feelings frequently develop between members of the encounter group and, naturally enough, these feelings sometimes occur between men and women. Inevitably, some of these feelings have a sexual component and this can be a matter of great concern to the participants, and—if the feelings are not satisfactorily worked through—a profound threat to their spouses. Again, my experience indicates that in the long run it is a great growth experience for an individual to discover that he can have loving and even sexual feelings toward members of the opposite sex other than his own spouse, and that these feelings do not lead to catastrophe.

Another negative aspect is that an individual who has been in encounter groups before may stultify a new group. He can exhibit what has been called the "old pro" phenomenon, feeling that he has learned the rules of the game and trying, subtly or openly, to impose these rules on newcomers. I believe that this phenomenon develops most frequently when there has been a degree of phoniness in the group he attended before.

In groups as elsewhere in life, all significant learning is to some degree painful and involves turbulence within the individual and within the system. I see no way of avoiding this if there is to be constructive change.

Turbulence within an organization is particularly difficult to handle, especially when we take into account the fact that the higher the status of the individual and the more he has to defend then the more difficult it is for him to be open with his colleagues and subordinates. This means that it is usually easier to reach the low-status people in an

organization than it is the high-status ones. Thus, the turbulence at the top tends to have a lid on it and explosions can occur.

Life Remedy. The intensive group experience appears to be one cultural attempt to meet the isolation and alienation of contemporary life. The person who is involved in a basic encounter with another is no longer an isolated individual. Since alienation is one of the most disturbing aspects of our modern life, this is important.

The group experience also is an avenue to fulfillment. When material needs are largely satisfied, individuals turn to the psychological world, groping for authenticity and fulfillment. One participant says: "It has opened up infinite possibilities for me in my relationship to myself and to everyone dear to me. I feel truly alive."

And the group is an instrument for handling tensions, which is important in a culture torn by racial explosion, student violence and all types of conflict, because it offers gut-level communication. It has been tried all too infrequently in such tension situations, but when it has been used it has shown real promise in reducing conflict.

The intensive group experience has an even more general philosophical implication. It is one expression of the existential point of view that is so pervasive in art and literature. The implicit goal of the group process seems to be to live life fully in the here and now of the relationship, obviously an existential point of view.

One of the unspoken problems of our time is how rapidly the human organism can adapt to change. Can we leave the dogma and fixity of man's past approach to life and learn to live in a process manner in a state of continual changingness? Clearly the intensive group experience can help.

A final issue raised by this experience is our model of the human being. What is the goal of personality development? It seems evident from our review of the group process that in a climate of freedom and facilitation, group members become more spontaneous and flexible, more closely related to their feelings—open to their experience, and closer and more expressively intimate in their interpersonal relationships. This is the kind of human being we seem to be moving toward. Yet such a model violates many religious and cultural points of view and is not necessarily the ideal or goal toward which the average man in our society would wish to move. Hence, the issue needs open consideration.

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