

## 2 The Process of the Encounter Group<sup>1</sup>

What really goes on in an encounter group? This is a question often asked by persons who are contemplating joining one, or who are puzzled by the statements of people who have had the experience. The question has been of great interest to me also, as I have tried to understand what appear to be common elements in the group experience. I have come to sense, at least dimly, some of the patterns or stages a group seems to go through and will describe them as best I can.

My formulation is simple and naturalistic. I am not attempting to build a high-level abstract theory,<sup>2</sup> nor to make profound interpretations of unconscious motives or of some developing group psyche. You will not find me speaking of group myths, or even of dependence and counterdependence. I am not comfortable with such inferences, correct though they may be. At this stage of our knowledge I wish merely to describe the observable events and the way in which, to me, these events seem to cluster. In doing so I am drawing on my own experience and that of others with whom I have worked, upon written material in this field, upon the written reactions of many individuals who have participated in such groups, and to some extent upon recordings of such group sessions, which we are only beginning to tap and analyze.

As I consider the terribly complex interactions that arise in twenty, forty, or sixty or more hours of intensive sessions, I believe I see certain threads which weave in and out of the pattern. Some of these trends or tendencies are likely to appear early, some later in the group sessions, but there is no clear-cut sequence in which one ends and another begins. The interaction is best thought of, I believe, as a rich and varied tapestry, differing from group to group, yet with certain kinds of trends evident in most of these intensive encounters and with certain patterns tending to precede and others to follow. Here are some of the process patterns I see developing, briefly described in simple terms, illustrated from tape recordings and personal reports and presented in roughly sequential order.

1. *Milling around*. As the leader or facilitator makes clear at the outset that this is a group with unusual freedom and not one for which he will take directional responsibility, there tends to develop a period of initial confusion, awkward silence, polite surface interaction, "cocktail-party talk," frustration, and great lack of continuity. The individuals come face to face with the fact that "there is no structure here except what we provide. We do not know our purposes, we do not even know each other, and we are committed to remain together over a considerable period of time." In this situation, confusion and frustration are natural. 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 off on some completely different tangent as though he had never heard A. One member makes a simple

1. Much of the material in this chapter was published in abbreviated form in a chapter of *Challenges of Humanistic Psychology*, J. F. T. Bugental, ed. (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1967), and also in *Psychology Today*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (December, 1969).

2. Jack and Lorraine Gibb have long been working on an analysis of trust development as the essential theory of group process. Others who have contributed significantly to the theory of group process are Chris Argyris, Kenneth Benne, Warren Bennis, Robert Blake, Dorwin Cartwright, Matthew Miles. Samples of the thinking of all these and others may be found in the following books: *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method*, edited by Bradford, Gibb, and Benne (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1964); *The Planning of Change*, edited by Bennis, Benne, and Chin (New York: John Wiley

suggestion such as, "I think we should introduce ourselves," and this may lead to several hours of highly involved discussion in which the underlying issues appear to be: Who will tell us what to do? Who is responsible for us? What is the purpose of the group?

2. *Resistance to personal expression or exploration.* During the milling-around period some individuals are likely to reveal rather personal attitudes. This tends to provoke a very ambivalent reaction among other members of the group. One member, writing of his experience afterward, says, "There is a self which I present to the world and another one which I know more intimately. With others I try to appear able, knowing, unruffled, problem-free. To substantiate this image I will act in a way which at the time or later seems false or artificial or 'not the real me.' Or I will keep to myself thoughts which if expressed would reveal an imperfect me.

"My inner self, by contrast with the image I present to the world, is characterized by many doubts. The worth I attach to this inner self is subject to much fluctuation and is very dependent on how others are reacting to me. At times this private self can feel worthless."

It is the public self that members tend to show each other, and only gradually, fearfully, and ambivalently do they take steps to reveal something of the private self.

Early in one intensive workshop, the members were asked to write anonymously a statement of some feeling or feelings they had which they were not willing to tell in the group. One man wrote, "I don't relate easily to people. I have an almost impenetrable façade. Nothing gets in to hurt me but nothing gets out. I have repressed so many emotions that I am close to emotional sterility. This situation doesn't make me happy but I don't know what to do about it." This individual is clearly living in a private dungeon, but except in this disguised fashion he does not even dare to send out a call for help.

In a recent workshop, when one man started to express the concern he felt about an impasse he was experiencing 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 when you decide to keep it from her? It just isn't safe to go further." It seemed quite clear that in his warning this second member was also expressing his own fear of revealing *himself*, and *his* lack of trust in the group.

3. *Description of past feelings.* In spite of ambivalence about the trustworthiness of the group, and the risk of exposing oneself, expression of feelings does begin to assume a larger proportion of the discussion. The executive tells how frustrated he feels by certain situations in his industry; the housewife relates problems she has with her children. A tape-recorded exchange involving a Roman Catholic nun occurs early in a one-week workshop, when talk has turned to a rather intellectualized discussion of anger:

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and Sons, 1964); *The Planning of Change*, edited by Bennis, Benne, and chin (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1961); and *Interpersonal Dynamics*, edited by Bennis, Schein, Berlew, and Steele (Homewood, Ill.: The Dorsey Press, 1964). Thus there are many promising leads for theory construction involving a considerable degree of abstraction. This chapter has a more elementary aim: a naturalistic descriptive account of the process.

Bill: What happens when you get mad, Sister, or don't you?

Sister: Yes, I do—yes I do. And I find when I get mad, I, I almost get, well, the kind of person that antagonizes me is the person who seems so unfeeling toward people—now I take our dean as a person in point because she is a very aggressive woman and has certain ideas about what the various rules in a college should be; and this woman can just send me into high “G”; in an angry mood. *I mean this*. But then I find, I . . .

Facil.<sup>3</sup>: But what, what do you do?

Sister: I find that when I'm in a situation like this, I strike out in a very sharp *tone* or else I refuse to respond—“all right, this happens to be her way”—I don't think I've ever gone into a tantrum.

Joe: You just withdraw—no use to fight it.

Facil.: You say you use a sharp tone. To *her*, or to other people you're dealing with?

Sister: Oh no! To *her*.

This is a typical example of a *description* of feelings which in a sense are obviously current in her but which she is placing in the past and describes as being outside the group in time and place. It is an example of feelings existing “there and then.”

4. *Expression of negative feelings*. Curiously enough, the first expression of genuinely significant “here and now” feeling is apt to come out in negative attitudes toward other group members or the group leader. In one group in which members introduced themselves at some length, 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, a man in the group attacked her vigorously and angrily for this stand, accusing her of failing to cooperate, of keeping herself aloof from the group, of being unreasonable. It was the first *current personal feeling* brought into the open in the group.

Frequently the leader is attacked for his failure to give proper guidance. One vivid example of this comes from a recorded account of an early session with a group of delinquents, where one member shouts at the leader, “You'll 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'll make 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!”<sup>4</sup>

An adult expresses his disgust at people who talk too much, but points his irritation at the leader. “It's just that I don't understand why someone doesn't shut them up. I would have taken Gerald and shoved him out the window. I'm an authoritarian. I would have told him he was talking too much and he had to leave the room. I think the group discussion ought to be led by a person who simply will not recognize these people after they've interrupted about eight times.”<sup>5</sup>

Why are negatively toned expressions the first current feelings to be expressed? Some speculative answers might be the following. This is one of the best ways to test the freedom and trustworthiness of the group. Is it *really* a place where I can be and express myself, positively and negatively? Is this *really* a safe place, 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. If I say I love you, I am vulnerable and open to the most awful rejection. If I say I hate you, I am at best liable to attack, against which I can defend. Whatever the reasons, such negatively toned feelings tend to be the first “here and now” material to appear.

5. *Expression and exploration of personally meaningful material*. It may seem puzzling that, following such negative experiences as the initial confusion, the resistance to personal expression, the focus on outside events, and the voicing of critical or angry feelings, the event most likely to occur next is for some individual to reveal himself to the group in a significant way. The reason for

3. Sometimes referred to as leader or trainer, for this person the term facilitator is most used in this book.

4. T. Gordon, *Group-Centered Leadership* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1955), p. 214.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 210.

this no doubt is that the individual 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 experienced the fact that negative feelings have been expressed and accepted or assimilated without catastrophic results. He realizes there is a freedom here, albeit a risky freedom. A climate of trust is beginning to develop. So he begins to take the chance and the gamble of letting the group know some deeper facet 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 tells of the anger he has bottled up because of unreasonable treatment by one of his superiors. What should he have done? What might he do now? 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 single *friend* in his life. By the time he finishes, he is letting loose some of the tears of sorrow for himself which I am sure he has held in for many years. A psychiatrist tells of the guilt he feels because of the suicide of one of his patients. A man of forty tells of his absolute inability to free himself from the grip of his controlling mother. A process which one workshop member has called “a journey to the center of self,” often a very painful process, has begun.

A recorded example of such exploration is found in a statement by Sam, member of a one-week workshop. Someone had spoken of his 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 the *genuine surprise* I had, 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 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.

Such exploration is not always an easy process, nor is the whole group receptive to such self-revelation. In a group of institutionalized adolescents, all of whom have been in difficulty of one sort or another, one boy reveals an important aspect of himself and is immediately met by both acceptance and sharp nonacceptance from other members.

George: This is the thing. I've got too many problems at home—um, I think some of you know why I'm here, what I was charged with.

Mary: I don't.

Facil.: Do you want to tell us?

George: Well—uh—it's sort of embarrassing.

Carol: Come on, it won't be so bad.

George: Well, I raped my sister. That's the only problem I have at home and I've overcome that, I think. (Rather long pause.)

Freda: Oooh, that's weird!

Mary: People have problems, Freda, I mean ya know . . .

Freda: Yeah, I know, but *yeOUW!!!*

Facil.: (To Freda) You know about these problems, but they still are weird to you.

George: You see what I mean; it's embarrassing to talk about it.

Mary: Yeah, but it's OK.

George: It *hurts* to talk about it, but I know I've got to so I won't be guilt-ridden for the rest of my life.

Clearly Freda is completely shutting him out psychologically, while Mary in particular is showing a deep acceptance. George is definitely willing to take the *risk*.

6. *The expression of immediate interpersonal feelings in the group.* Entering into the process, sometimes earlier, sometimes later, is the explicit bringing into the open of feelings experienced in the immediate moment by one member toward another. These are sometimes positive, sometimes negative. 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.

7. *The development of a healing capacity in the group.* One of the most fascinating aspects of any intensive group experience is to observe the manner in which a number of the group members show a natural and spontaneous capacity for dealing in a helpful, facilitating, and therapeutic fashion with the pain and suffering of others. As one rather extreme example of this I think of a man in charge of maintenance in a large plant who was one of the low status members of an industrial executive group. As he informed us, he had “not been contaminated by education.” In the initial phases the group tended to look down on him. As members delved more deeply into themselves and began to express their own attitudes more fully, this man came forth as without doubt the most sensitive member of the group. He knew intuitively how to be understanding and accepting. He was alert to things which had not yet been expressed but were just below the surface. While the rest of us were paying attention to a member who was speaking, he would frequently spot another individual who was suffering silently and in need of help. He had a deeply perceptive and facilitating attitude. This kind of ability shows up so commonly in groups that it has led me to feel that the ability to be healing or therapeutic is far more common in human life than we suppose. Often it needs only the permission granted—or freedom made possible—by the climate of a free-flowing group experience to become evident.

Here is a characteristic instance of the leader and several group members trying to help Joe, who has been telling of the almost complete lack of communication between himself and his wife. A lengthy excerpt from the recorded session seems justified, since it shows in what varied ways members endeavor to give help. John keeps putting before him the feelings his wife is almost certainly experiencing. The facilitator keeps challenging his façade of carefulness. Marie tries to help him discover what he is feeling at the moment. Fred shows him the choice he has of alternative behaviors. All this is clearly done in a spirit of caring, as is even more evident in the recording itself. No miracles are achieved, but toward the end Joe does come to realize that the only thing that might help would be to *express his real feelings* to his wife.

Joe: I’ve got to be real careful when I go somewhere if I know a lot of people and do things, so that my wife just doesn’t feel that she’s left out; and of course, I—things have changed so in the last year that I have hope, but for a while I *didn’t*. I don’t know whether we can break through it or not. (Pause.)

John: It comes to me over and over again that she wants very much to get inside—inside you.

Joe: She does.

John: I, I didn’t mean in a hurting way, I mean . . .

Joe: No. (Pause.) But it’s how to do it. And gosh, I’ve gotta let her in; but gosh, I’ve also gotta be so *careful* and the chances don’t come very often . . .

Facil.: Do you feel you got somewhere in this group by being careful? (Pause.)

Joe: Well, I’ve been pretty hard the other way here. In other words I think we haven’t been careful here at all.

Facil.: I don’t either. I think you’ve taken a lot of risks.

Joe: What I meant by being careful is, I’ve gotta be careful about how I say anything or it’s twisted on me.

Facil.: If—well, I guess I’ll be more blunt. If you think she can’t tell when you’re being very careful,

you're *nuts*.

Joe: Yeah, I agree.

Facil.: And if somebody approaches me—and I feel they're moving very gingerly and carefully, then I wonder, what's he trying to put over on me?

Joe: Well, I've tried it the other way—the worst thing is—maybe, to begin with I was too blunt. That's when we got into our arguments.

Facil.: Yeah, but it sounds—I really appreciate the risk you're taking, or the trust you're putting in us to tell us about this kind of situation. Yet you start talking about the elements *outside* of yourself.

John: I keep wanting to ask if you can *feel* her feelings?

Joe: Well, uh, now—feelings, I, yes I'm getting so I can feel her feelings much more and—uh—I—uh—the thing that bothered me was I remembered some feelings that she wanted to come in, and at that time I turned her down. Now that's where I got turned off. And—but I can feel right away when she's upset and so then I—well I don't know—you see then I . . .

Facil.: What does that do to your feelings? Suppose you come home and you find that she's quiet, because you've been away and she's wondering about what has been going on and she's quite upset. What's that going to make you *feel*?

Joe: Uh—a tendency to withdraw.

Marie: What would you be feeling—withdrawal? Or would you be feeling upset, or maybe even anger?

Joe: I did before—not now so much—I can get that pretty much. I've watched that pretty carefully.

Marie: Yes, but that isn't my question, Joe.

Joe: All right.

Marie: I'm not asking if you can control it or push it away. What will the *feeling* be there?

Joe: Uh—I'm pretty much at the place now where it's just sort of withdrawal and wait; and I know if I can get by that evening, it'll be different tomorrow morning.

Fred: Do you feel it might be defensive, and do you express this defense in withdrawing because . . .

Joe: Well, she doesn't like it.

Fred: But you like it *less* this way than getting involved in an argument or disagreement?

Joe: Yeah—because the only thing that might work is—is if I *just expressed the feeling*. And I hope that'll make a difference—that “I resented what you just said” or something like that, because before I would *answer* her, and boy, it was off! *That just didn't work*, and then she would always say I started it—but *with my being so conscious* now of when she's upset—I mean—I've got that real clear, and I just haven't known how to handle it.

Clearly each of these several individuals is trying in his own way to help, to heal, to form a helping relationship with Joe so as to enable him to deal with his wife in a more constructive, more real way.

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

Some examples of the kinds of attitude expressed would be these: “I *am* a dominating person who likes to control others. I do want to mold these individuals into the proper shape.” “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 responsible manager.”

I think of one government executive, a man with high responsibility and excellent technical training as an engineer. At the first meeting of the group he impressed me, and I think others, as being cold, aloof, somewhat bitter, resentful, cynical. When he spoke of how he ran his office he appeared to administer it “by the book” without warmth or human feeling entering in. In one of the early sessions, when he spoke of his wife a group member asked him, “Do you love your wife?” He paused for a long time, and the questioner said, “OK, that's answer enough.” The executive said, “No, wait a minute! The reason I didn't respond was that I was wondering if I ever loved anyone. I

don't think I have *ever* really *loved* anyone." It seemed quite dramatically clear to those of us in the group that he had come to accept himself as an unloving person.

A few days later he listened with great intensity as one member of the group expressed profound personal feelings of isolation, loneliness, pain, and the extent to which he had been living behind a mask, a façade. The next morning the engineer said, "Last night I thought and thought about what Bill told us. I even wept quite a bit by myself. I can't remember how long it has been since I've cried and I really *felt* something. I think perhaps what I felt was love."

It is not surprising that before the week was over he had thought through new ways of handling his growing son, on whom he had been placing extremely rigorous demands. He had also begun genuinely to appreciate his wife's love for him, which he now felt he could in some measure reciprocate.

Another recorded excerpt, from an adolescent group, shows a combination of self-acceptance and self-exploration. Art has been talking about his "shell," and here he is beginning to work with the problem of accepting himself and also the façade he ordinarily exhibits.

Art: When that shell's on it's, uh . . .

Lois: It's on!

Art: Yeah, it's on tight.

Susan: Are you always so closed in when you're in your shell?

Art: No, I'm so darn used to living with the shell, it doesn't even bother me. I don't even know the real me. I think I've, well, I've pushed the shell away more here. When I'm out of my shell—only twice—once just a few minutes ago—I'm really me, I guess. But then I just sort of pull in a cord after me when I'm in my shell, and that's almost all the time. And I leave the front standing outside when I'm back in the shell.

Facil.: And nobody's back in there with you?

Art: (Crying) Nobody else is in there with me, just me. I just pull everything into the shell and roll the shell up and shove it in my pocket. I take the shell, and the real me, and put it in my pocket where it's safe. I guess that's really the way I do it—I go into my shell and turn off the real world. And here that's what I want to do here in this group, y' know—come out of my shell and actually throw it away.

Lois: You're making progress already. At least you can talk about it.

Facil.: Yeah. The thing that's going to be hardest is to stay out of the shell.

Art: (Still crying) Well, yeah, if I can keep talking about it I can come out and stay out, but I'm gonna have to, y' know, protect me. It hurts. It's actually hurting to talk about it.

One can see very clearly here the deeper acceptance of this withdrawn self as being himself. But the beginning of change is equally evident.

Still another person reporting shortly after his workshop experience says, "I came away from the workshop feeling much more deeply that 'It's all right to be me with all my strengths and weaknesses.' My wife told me that I seem more authentic, more real, more genuine."

This feeling of greater realness and authenticity is a very common experience. It would appear that the individual is learning to accept and to *be* himself and is thus 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.

One woman writes to tell how her father died very shortly after the encounter group, and she made a long and difficult trip to join her mother. ". . . a trip that seemed interminable with its confusing connections, my own bewilderment and deep sorrow, lack of sleep, and serious concern over mother's ill-health in the future. All I knew through the five days I spent there was that I wanted to *be* just the way I felt—that I wanted no 'anesthetic,' no conventional screen between myself and my feelings, and that the only way I could achieve this was by fully accepting the experience, by

*yielding* to shock and grief. This feeling of acceptance and yielding has remained with me ever since. Quite frankly, I think the workshop had a great deal to do with my willingness to accept this experience.”

9. *The cracking of façades.* As the sessions continue, so many things tend to occur together that it is hard to know which to describe first. It should again be stressed that these different threads and stages interweave and overlap. One of the threads is the increasing impatience with defenses. As time goes on the group finds it unbearable that any member should live behind a mask or front. The polite words, the 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 appears to strive intuitively and unconsciously, toward this goal. Gently at times, almost savagely at others, the group *demand*s that the individual be himself, that his current feelings not be hidden, 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 revealed himself not at all. The attitude of the group was finally expressed sharply by one member when he said, “Come out from behind that lectern, Doc. Stop giving us speeches. Take off your dark glasses. We want to know you.”

In Synanon, the fascinating group so successfully involved in making persons out of drug addicts, this ripping away of façades is often dramatic. An excerpt from one of the “synanons” or group sessions makes this clear:

Joe: (Speaking to Gina) I wonder when you’re going to stop sounding so good in synanons. Every synanon that I’m in with you, someone asks you a question and you’ve got a beautiful book written. All made out about what went down and how you were wrong and how you realized you were wrong and all that kind of bullshit. When are you going to stop doing that? How do you feel about Art?

Gina: I have nothing against Art.

Will: You’re a nut. Art hasn’t got any damn sense. He’s been in there, yelling at you and Moe, and you’ve got everything so cool.

Gina: No, I feel he’s very insecure in a lot of ways but that has nothing to do with me . . .

Joe: You act like you’re so goddamn understanding.

Gina: I was *told* to act as if I understand.

Joe: Well, you’re in a synanon now. You’re not supposed to be acting like you’re such a goddamn healthy person. Are you so well?

Gina: No.

Joe: Well, why the hell don’t you quit acting as if you were?<sup>6</sup>

If I am indicating that the group is quite violent at times in tearing down a façade or defense, this is accurate. On the other hand, it can also be sensitive and gentle. The man who was accused of hiding behind a lectern was deeply hurt by this attack, and over the lunch hour looked very troubled, as though he might break into tears at any moment. When the group reconvened, the members sensed this and treated him very gently, enabling him to tell us his own tragic personal story, which accounted for his aloofness and his intellectual and academic approach to life.

10. *The individual receives feedback.* In the process of this freely expressive interaction, the individual rapidly acquires a great deal of data as to how he appears to others. The hail-fellow-well-met finds that others resent his exaggerated friendliness. The executive who weighs his words carefully and speaks with heavy precision may discover for the first time that others regard him as stuffy. A woman who shows a somewhat excessive desire to be of help to others is told in no



uncertain terms that some group members do not want her for a mother. All this can be decidedly upsetting, but so long as these various bits of information are fed back in the context of caring which is developing in the group, they seem highly constructive.

An example of one kind of feedback occurred in a group where it was suggested that members describe each other as animate or inanimate objects. This gave some powerful feedback.

John: (To Alma) As long as we're talking about things, might as well pick on you a little bit. You remind me of a butterfly. (Laughter.)

Alma: Why is that? I mean how, I mean, why do you say a butterfly?

John: Well, to me a butterfly is a curious thing. It's a thing you can get up pretty close to, as you might say, as a new friend, but just about the time that you can get up to it and pet it or bring it in closer to you and look at it, it flits away.

Alma: (Laughs nervously.)

John: Y' know, it's gone, and until you wear it out, you know—or wet it down until it's so tired it can't fly any more—or else you teach it to trust you—you can't get close enough to it to touch it or find out anything real about it, except from a distance. You remind me of a butterfly in that way. Something that possibly would be quite pretty to look at close up, but you can never get that close.

To tell a woman that she is fearful of any close relationship is something which would occur very rarely indeed in ordinary social interaction. But such data are often made available to the person in an encounter group.

Feedback can at times be very warm and positive, as the following recorded excerpt indicates:

Leo: (Very softly and gently) I've been struck with this ever since she talked about her waking in the night, that she has a very delicate sensitivity. (Turning to Mary and speaking almost caressingly) And somehow I perceive—even looking at you or in your eyes—a very—almost like a gentle touch and from this gentle touch you can tell many—things—you sense in—this manner.

Fred: Leo, when you said that, that she has this kind of delicate sensitivity, I just felt, *Lord yes!* Look at her eyes.

Leo: M-h'm.

A much more extended instance of both negative and positive feedback, triggering a significant new experience of self-understanding and encounter with the group, is taken from the diary kept by a young man who felt very much unloved. He had been telling the group that he had no feeling for them and felt they had no feeling for him.

. . . Then, a girl lost patience with me and said she didn't feel she could give any more. She said I looked like a bottomless well, and she wondered how many times I had to be told that *I was* cared for. By this time I was feeling panicky, and I was saying to myself, "God, can it be true that I can't be satisfied and that I'm somehow compelled to pester people for attention until I drive them away!"

At this point while I was really worried, a nun in the group spoke up. She said that I had not alienated her with some negative things I had said to her. She said she liked me, and she couldn't understand why I couldn't see that. She said she felt concerned for me and wanted to help me. With that, something began to really dawn on me and I voiced it somewhat like the following. "You mean you are still sitting there feeling for me what I say I want you to feel and that somewhere down inside me I'm stopping it from touching me?" I relaxed appreciably and began really to wonder why I had shut their caring out so much. I couldn't find the answer, and one woman said: "It looks like you are trying to stay continuously as deep in your feelings as you were this afternoon. It would make sense to me for you to draw back and assimilate it. Maybe if you don't push so hard, you can rest a while and then move back into your feelings more naturally."

Her making the last suggestion really took effect. I saw the sense in it, and almost immediately I settled back very relaxed with something of a feeling of a bright, warm day dawning inside me. In addition to taking the pressure off of myself, I was for the first time really warmed by the friendly feelings which I felt they had

for me. It is difficult to say why I felt liked only just then, but as opposed to the earlier sessions I really *believed* they cared for me. I never have fully understood why I stood their affection off for so long, but at that point I almost abruptly began to trust that they did care. The measure of the effectiveness of this change lies in what I said next. I said, “Well, that really takes care of me. I’m really ready to listen to someone else now.” I *meant* that, too.<sup>7</sup>

*11. 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 individual *confronts* another, directly “levelling” with him. Such confrontations can be positive, but frequently they are decidedly negative, as the following example will make abundantly clear. In one of the last sessions of a group, Alice had made some quite vulgar and contemptuous remarks to John, who was entering religious work. The next morning, Norma, who has been a very quiet person in the group, takes the floor:

Norma: (Loud sigh) Well, I don’t have *any* respect for you, Alice. *None!* (Pause) There’s about a hundred things going through my mind I want to say to you, *and by God I* hope I get through ‘em all! 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 on him today?* H’mmm? Last night—couldn’t *you—couldn’t* you *accept—couldn’t* you comprehend in any way at all that—that *he felt* his unworthiness in the service of God? *Couldn’t you accept* this or did you have to dig into it today to find something *else* there? H’mmm? I personally don’t think John has any problems that are *any* of *your damn business!* . . . *Any* real woman that I know wouldn’t have acted as you have this week, and particularly what you said this afternoon. That was so *crass* It just made me want to puke, right there! ! ! And—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 so hard and—oh, and* you’re so, you’re many years above me and I respect age, and I respect people who are older than me, *but I don’t respect you, Alice. At all!* (A startled pause.)

It may relieve the reader to know that these two women came to accept each other, not completely but much more understandingly, before the end of the session. But this *was* a confrontation!

*12. The helping relationship outside the group sessions.* No account of the group process would be adequate, in my opinion, if it did not mention many ways in which group members assist each other. One of the exciting aspects of any group experience is the way in which, when an individual is struggling to express himself, or wrestling with a personal problem, or hurting because of some painful new discovery about himself, other members give him help. This may be within the group, as mentioned earlier, but occurs even more frequently in contacts outside the group. When I see two individuals going for a walk together, or conversing in a quiet corner, or hear that they stayed up talking until 3:00 A.M. I feel it is quite probable that at some later time in the group we will hear that one was gaining strength and help from the other, that the second person was making available his understanding, his support, his experience, his caring—making himself *available* to the other. An incredible gift of healing is possessed by many persons, if only they feel freed to give it, and experience in an encounter group seems to make this possible.

Let me offer an example of the healing effect of the attitudes of group members both outside and within the group meetings. This is taken from a letter written by a workshop member to the group one month later. He speaks of the difficulties and depressing circumstances he has met during that month and adds,

I have come to the conclusion that my experiences with you have profoundly affected me. I am truly grateful.

7. G. F. Hall, “A Participant’s Experience in a Basic Encounter Group.” Unpublished manuscript, 1965.

This is different than personal therapy. None of *you had* to care about me. None of you had to seek me out and let me know of things you thought would help me. None of you had to let me know I was of help to you. Yet you did, and as a result it has far more meaning than anything I have so far experienced. When I feel the need to hold back and not live spontaneously, for whatever reasons, I remember that twelve persons just like those before me now said to let go and be congruent, be myself and of all unbelievable things they even loved me more for it. This has given me the *courage* to come out of myself many times since then. Often it seems my very doing of this helps the others to experience similar freedom.

13. *The basic encounter.* Running through some of the trends I have just been describing is the fact that individuals come into much closer and more direct contact with each other than is customary in ordinary life. This appears to be one of the most central, intense, and change-producing aspects of group experience. To illustrate, I should like to draw an example from a recent workshop group. A man tells, through his tears, of the tragic loss of his child, a grief which he is experiencing *fully* for the first time, not holding back his feelings in any way. Another says to him, also with tears in his eyes, "I've never before felt a real physical hurt in me from the pain of another. I feel completely with you." This is a basic encounter.

From another group, a mother with several children who describes herself as "a loud, prickly, hyperactive individual," whose marriage has been on the rocks and who has felt that life was just not worth living, writes,

I had really buried under a layer of concrete many feelings I was afraid people were going to laugh at or stomp on which, needless to say, was working all kinds of hell on my family and on me. I had been looking forward to the workshop with my last few crumbs of hope. It was really a needle of trust in a huge haystack of despair [She tells of some of her experiences in the group, and adds,] . . . the real turning point for me was a simple gesture on your part of putting your arm around my shoulder one afternoon when I had made some crack about you not being a member of the group—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 had ever experienced. I have felt needed, loving, competent, furious, frantic, anything and everything but just plain *loved*. You can imagine the flood of gratitude, humility, release that swept over me. I wrote with considerable joy, "I actually felt *loved*." I doubt that I shall soon forget it.

Such I-Thou relationships (to use Buber's term again) occur with some frequency in these group sessions and nearly always bring a moistness to the eyes of the participants.

One member, trying to sort out his experiences immediately after a workshop, speaks of the "commitment to relationship" which often developed on the part of two individuals—not necessarily individuals who have liked each other initially. He goes on to say, ". . . 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. . . . Thus real change seemed to occur when feelings were experienced and expressed in the context of the relationship. 'I can't *stand* the way you talk!' turned into a real understanding and affection for you the *way* you talk." This statement seems to capture some of the more complex meanings of the term basic encounter.

14. *The expression of positive feelings and closeness.* As indicated in the last section, an inevitable part of the group process seems to be that when feelings are expressed and can be accepted in a relationship, then a great deal of closeness and positive feeling results. Thus as the sessions proceed, an increasing feeling of warmth and group spirit and trust is built up, not out of positive attitudes only but out of a realness which includes both positive and negative feeling. One member tried to capture this in writing shortly after a workshop by saying that if he were trying to sum it up, ". . . it would have to do with what I call confirmation—a kind of confirmation of myself, of the uniqueness and universal qualities of men, a confirmation that when we can be human together something

positive can emerge.”

A particularly poignant expression of these positive attitudes was shown in the group where Norma confronted Alice with her bitterly angry feelings. Joan, the facilitator, was deeply upset and began to weep. The positive and healing attitudes of the group for their own *leader* is an unusual example of the closeness and personal quality of the relationships.

Joan: (Crying) I somehow feel that it's so *damned* easy for me to—to put myself *inside* of another person and I just guess I can feel that—for John and Alice and for you, Norma.

Alice: And it's you that's hurt.

Joan: Maybe I am taking some of that hurt. I guess I am (crying). Alice: That's a wonderful gift. I wish I had it.

Joan: You have a lot of it.

Peter: In a way you bear the—I guess in a special way, because you're the—facilitator, you've probably borne an extra heavy burden for all of us . . . we grope to try to accept one another as we are, and—for each of us in various ways I guess we reach things and we say, *please* accept me; I want to leave this *right here*, and . . .

Norma: Then we don't.

Peter: And—and we're placing this burden on you now, perhaps, and with your feelings it can be an extra heavy burden—for people asking you please to *accept me* this way. You think it might be that?

Joan: (Still weeping) Well, I really don't put the blame on the other people; I think that's—that's *my* problem, really, you know, that I *take* that burden, or whatever it is. I mean I'd take it just as much if I weren't the facilitator—I don't think it's the role.

Peter: No, no, it's not the role . . .

Norma: No, definitely not . . .

George: I don't think it's what people put on your mind; I think it's this fantastic sensitivity you have—what you share in—and then you bear the burden—I think you mean a lot more to me now than before. There were times when I wondered about you and whether you were going to approach us as people or as clients. I think I did say once this week, though, that I had the feeling that if it ever became necessary, you would show the skeleton in the closet—if you thought it were necessary. You're that *honest* about things. And I think that this shows that you—you *showed* it; the other side of you that we haven't seen all week. It makes me feel bad that I'm this way—one in the group that doesn't help you at the moment to feel better.

Some may be very critical of a “leader” so involved and so sensitive that she weeps at the tensions in the group which she has taken into herself. For myself it is simply another evidence that when people are real with each other, they have an astonishing ability to heal a person with a real and understanding love, whether that person is “participant” or “leader.”

15. *Behavior changes in the group.* It would seem from observation that many changes in behavior occur in the group itself. Gestures change. The tone of voice changes, becoming sometimes stronger, sometimes softer, usually more spontaneous, less artificial, with more feeling. Individuals show an astonishing amount of thoughtfulness and helpfulness toward each other.

Our major concern, however, is with the behavior changes that occur following the group experience. This constitutes the most significant question, on which we need much more study and research. One person gives a catalog which may seem too pat, but which is echoed in many other statements, of the changes he sees in 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.”

Another says, “. . . Since the workshop there has been found a new relationship with my parents. It has been trying and hard. However, I have found a greater freedom in talking with them, especially my father. Steps have been made toward being closer to my mother than I have ever been in the last five years.” Another says, “It helped clarify my feelings about my work, gave me more enthusiasm for it, made me more honest and cheerful with my co-workers and also more open when I was hostile. It made my relationship with my wife more open, deeper. We felt freer to talk about anything and we felt confident that anything we talked about we could work through.”

Sometimes the changes described are very subtle. “The primary change is the more positive view of my ability to allow myself to *hear*, and to become involved with someone else’s ‘silent scream.’”

At the risk of making the outcomes sound too good, I will add one more statement written shortly after a workshop by a mother. She says, “The immediate impact on my children was of interest to both me and my husband. I feel that having been so accepted and loved by a group of strangers was so supportive that when I returned home my love for the people closest to me was much more spontaneous. Also, the practice I had in accepting and loving others during the workshop was evident in my relationships with my close friends.”

In a later chapter I shall try to summarize the different kinds of behavior changes we find, both positive and negative.

## **Failures, Disadvantages, Risks**

Thus far one might think that every aspect of the group process is positive. As far as the evidence at hand indicates, it appears that it is nearly always a positive process for a majority of the participants. Failures nevertheless result. Let me try to describe briefly some negative aspects of the group process as they sometimes occur.

The most obvious deficiency of the intensive group experience is that frequently the behavior changes that occur, if any, are not lasting. This is often recognized by the participants. One says, “I wish I had the ability to hold permanently the ‘openness’ I left the conference with.” Another says, “I experienced a lot of acceptance, warmth, and love at the workshop. I find it hard to carry the ability to share this in the same way with people outside the workshop. I find it easier to slip back into my old unemotional role than to do the work necessary to open relationships.”

Sometimes group members experience this phenomenon of “relapse” quite philosophically. “The group experience is not a way of life but a reference point. My images of our group, even though I am unsure of some of their meanings, give me a comforting and useful perspective on my normal routine. They are like a mountain which I have climbed and enjoyed and to which I hope occasionally to return.” I will comment further on this “slippage” in the chapter on research findings.

A second potential risk involved in the intensive group experience, and one often mentioned in public discussion, is that the individual may become deeply involved in revealing himself and then be left with problems which are not worked through. There have been a number of reports of people who have felt, following an intensive group experience, that they must go to a therapist to work through the feelings which were opened up in the intensive experience of the workshop and were left unresolved. It is obvious that without knowing more about each individual situation it is difficult to say whether this is a negative outcome or a partially or entirely positive one. There are also very occasional accounts of an individual having a psychotic episode during or immediately following an intensive group experience. On the other side of the picture is the fact that individuals have also lived through what were clearly psychotic episodes, and lived through them very constructively, in the context of a basic encounter group. My own tentative clinical judgment would be that the more positively the group process proceeds the less likely it is that any individual would be psychologically damaged through membership in the group. It is obvious, however, that this is a serious issue and that much more needs to be known.

Some of the tension that exists in workshop members as a result of this potential for damage is

well described by one participant when he says, "I feel the workshop had some very precious moments for me when I felt very close indeed to particular persons. It had some frightening moments when its potency was very evident, and I realized a particular person might be deeply hurt or greatly helped, but I couldn't predict which."

There is another risk or deficiency in the basic encounter group. Until very recent years it has been unusual for a workshop to include both husband and wife. This can be a real problem if significant change has taken place in one spouse during or as a result of the workshop experience. One individual feels this risk clearly after attending a workshop. He says, "I think there is a great danger to a marriage when only one spouse attends a group. It is too hard for the other spouse to compete with the group individually and collectively." One of the frequent after-effects of the intensive group experience is that it brings out into the open for discussion marital tensions which have been kept under cover.

Another risk which has sometimes been a cause of real concern in mixed intensive workshops is that very positive and warm and loving feelings can develop between members of the encounter group (as is evident both in some of the foregoing examples and in later chapters). Inevitably some of these feelings have a sexual component, and this can be a matter of great concern to the participants and a profound threat to their spouses if these are not worked through satisfactorily in the workshop. Also the close and loving feelings which develop may become a source of threat and marital difficulty when a wife, for example, has not been present, but projects many fears about the loss of her spouse—whether well founded or not—onto the workshop experience.

A man who had been in a mixed group of men and women executives wrote to me a year later and mentioned the strain in his marriage that resulted from his association with Marge, a member of his basic encounter group. "There was a problem about Marge. There had occurred a very warm feeling on my part for Marge, a great compassion, for I felt she was *very* lonely. I believe the warmth was sincerely reciprocal. At any rate she wrote me a long affectionate letter, which I let my wife read. I was proud that Marge could feel that way about me" (for he had felt very worthless). "But my wife was alarmed, because she read a love affair into the words—at least a *potential* threat. I stopped writing to Marge because I felt rather clandestine after that. My wife has since participated in an 'encounter group' herself, and she now understands. I have resumed writing to Marge." Obviously, not all such episodes would have such a harmonious ending.

It is of interest in this connection that there has been increasing experimentation in recent years with "couples workshops" and with workshops for industrial executives and their spouses.

Perhaps one other episode of "falling in love" in the group will be meaningful because it is reported with such utter frankness by Emma, a participant, a divorcee with children.

. . . Early in the first week I became aware of one man in the group who seemed to be confident about his masculinity, yet warm, insightful, and kind. This combination attracted me, and I recognized that this was the kind of male figure that gives me peace. By Thursday of the first week we had begun to find many things in common and spent time under the pines together. On Thursday, after the "T" group, he said to me, "Emma, I think I see that you may have threatened your husband and I think I see that you may threaten men." In answer to my unspoken query, he said, "You are so damn sure that you are right when you get an insight." This sent my self-esteem into my shoes as we walked into the general session and he sat down beside me. About five minutes later he turned to me with tears in his eyes and said, "My God, Emma, what I saw in you is what I stub my toe on in my own personnel work in the laboratories every day I work." As he made this remark, I fell in love with him from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. By making the problem a common one to males and females, I was freed from the box labeled "You are Destructive to Men."

Saturday noon Allen went home to his family and I remained in a state of wedding throughout Saturday and Sunday. Sunday night when he returned I perceived him as flooding me with love from his eyes and my world was complete. Monday morning very early I awakened sobbing. I was a little girl with a short ruffled dress. A hazy male figure hovered on the fringe of the scene. For the next three hours I experienced what it felt like to be loved by a father. It was interesting that in the three hours of feeling such a love, I never lost the feeling of being a woman in love with a man. Somehow the quality of Allen's love seemed to permit the feeling of

father-love in proper 'time and space as an enhancement to the feeling of mating. I'm afraid I am not making myself very clear but it is the best I can do. . . .

. . . Friday morning, on our last day, Allen insisted after the "T" group that we have a few minutes together. We sat on a low rock wall in the sunshine. He asked me if I would talk about our two weeks. What I said in reply was something like this: "We have found our way along an obstacle course. The relationship has been delicate and fragile. Once I put my trust in you I never lost faith that you could find the way. Of the future? I do not think I will fantasy you as my husband. I think I will always honor and love you as Allen E. who, by the quality of his love, has built into me the capacity to be a lovable and loving woman. I trust that in some way this experience has given you greater awareness of your capacity to be a loving man. What will sustain us in the future? It feels to me that the sustaining force will be that we both will know that as we interact with our separate families and professional colleagues, each in his own way will nurture. I have even some elusive feeling that my own three children in perceiving the new me will in some way come to know what it feels like to have a father." When I finished, Allen who has much greater insight and facility to express it than I, with tearful eyes, commented: "You have expressed it beautifully! We have lived a lifetime together."

At home this week one fear box after another keeps crumbling away as the new me oozes out. As I feel my new world, a serenity is so pervasive that it seems pudding-like and touchable. . . .

Here is a mature handling of a deep and delicate love relationship. I cannot doubt that it made for further growth and development in each of these individuals.

One more negative potential growing out of encounter groups has become evident in recent years. Some individuals who have participated in previous encounter groups may exert a stultifying influence on new workshops they attend. They sometimes exhibit what I think of as the "old pro" phenomenon. They feel they have learned the "rules of the game," and subtly or openly try to impose these rules on newcomers. Thus, instead of promoting true expressiveness or spontaneity, they endeavor to substitute new rules for old—to make members feel guilty if they are not expressing feelings, or are reluctant to voice criticism or hostility, or are talking about situations outside the group relationship, or are fearful to reveal themselves. These "old pros" seem to attempt to substitute a new tyranny in interpersonal relationships in the place of older conventional restrictions. To me this is a perversion of the true group process. We need to ask ourselves how this travesty on spontaneity comes about. Personally, I wonder about the quality of the facilitation in their previous group experiences.

## **CONCLUSION**

I have tried to give a naturalistic, observational picture of some of the common elements of the process which occur in the climate of freedom of an encounter group. I have pointed out some of the risks and shortcomings of the group experience. I hope I have also made clear that this is an area in which an enormous amount of deeply perceptive study and research is needed.