

Some Concerns About Group Experiences

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The current interest in psychological and educational groups has created some dilemmas that could possibly be avoided if more attention were given to ethical responsibility both by group leaders and group members. This statement may appear to be advocating a simple solution to some of the confusion, misunderstanding, and polarization of opinions regarding T-groups, encounter groups, sensitivity groups, and such, but, nevertheless, it seems that closer scrutiny of some of the basic motivations and needs of persons leading and participating in psychological and educational groups is past due. In many fields of art, sensory and emotional stimulation appears to be sufficient reason for the creation of a work of art, but should this be the *raison d'être* for a group experience?

Admittedly, most groups have encouraged honesty, openness, and love as essential and basic components of meaningful groups. The movie *Bob & Carol and Ted & Alice* plays upon this theme and presents a bewildering distortion of the outcome of a basic encounter group experience. When we observe Ted and Alice's reactions to Bob and Carol, on their return from the group, we are confronted with the fact that there may be a question as to whether we are all saying the same thing when we speak of such intangibles as "honesty," "openness," and "love." There remain in many people's minds such questions as: How honest can we afford to be? Does being completely open serve any useful purpose for me or others? Which manifestation of love is the appropriate one? Thus, simply chanting some altruistic clichés does not completely dismiss some of the problems encountered by group leaders and members. In my opinion, there are at least three major areas of the group experience, both

psychological and educational, to which more attention should be directed. The remainder of this article will examine these.

I. *Must all of us have deep group experiences before we can know ourselves or give meaning to our lives?*

The "group" has come to have almost a mystical aura for some people. Some of the virtues with which it has been attributed seem very close to what some devoutly religious persons have claimed to receive from religious conversion. It cannot be doubted that countless individuals have profited from participating in T-groups, basic encounter groups, group counselling, and sensitivity groups. However, we are being less than honest if we do not present the other side of the picture and admit that not all people have profited from these groups and there are indications that many individuals have been victims of psychotic effects of the group experience. Furthermore, not all individuals need these kinds of group experiences to grow and develop as persons.

The group should not be looked upon as the ultimate in human relations. There could conceivably exist many situations in which it is more practical and satisfying to work in a one-to-one relationship. Do we dare create the impression that the group situation is the best mode of operation for all problem-solving and meaningful human relationships or that one must be successful in group relationships before he can communicate well and effectively in a one-to-one relationship? Or that group therapy and/or counselling is more productive than individual? My opinion is that we should not create that impression primarily because we do not have empirical evidence to support it; further, we have done very little research to determine which people profit most from which particular kind of group experience.

We ought not in the fields of education and the behavioral sciences develop a "caste of Brahmins" who perceive themselves as having profound understandings of themselves and others because they have experienced the group and set themselves apart from those who have not had such an experience. Some of the individuals I have known in my group experiences tend to give credence to this assertion after I observed the kind of impression they made on individuals outside the group. The group experience must be a *part* of one's total learning experience and not the *whole* of his learning.

II. *Who leads groups? What needs may group leaders be satisfying for themselves?*

It has been stated that:

. . . there is an almost shocking nonchalance about the responsibility of the leader for managing the forces he sets in motion. My own judgment is that a group leader has no *more* but certainly no *less* responsibility than a counselor working with individuals . . .¹

This seems to be one of the critical issues of group leadership — taking responsibility for direction in the group and being aware of what is transpiring.

Educational leaders, as well as leaders in industry, religion, sociology, and other fields, have been eager to encourage individuals to have group experiences. It has been demonstrated that the experience has tremendous effects, both positive and negative, on individuals. The dynamics of development and process of groups have been analyzed in many ways. Yet little has been done to clarify who should lead groups. Daniel St. Albin Greene, writing in the *National Observer*, says:

Most professional group facilitators are behavioral psychologists. But the proliferation of encounter groups in the last year or so has produced countless amateur facilitators — teachers, college students, “endemic therapists” who cite relevant experience, rather than formal education, as their qualification for conducting specific types of encounters (former dope addicts, for instance).

The growing number of self-styled therapists is one source of concern to critics of the encounter-group movement. They also worry about the potential effects that uncontrolled emotional outpourings could have on unstable personalities.²

Another authority in the field has stated that:

. . . it is high time that we recognize that as behavioral scientists we have a moral responsibility to evaluate the ways in which our activities affect society . . . we need to examine the implications for our society when counselors employ such techniques as confrontation or operant conditioning to manipulate the behavior of others.³

It has been suggested that group leaders or trainers should have had, in addition to a recognized advanced degree in one of the "helping professions," background preparation in personality dynamics, a knowledge of psychopathology as well as preparation in group dynamics, social psychology, and sociology.⁴ This same authority suggests that they should have had an internship and extensive supervised experience.

It is obvious that we cannot set up any rigid criteria for selection or certification of group leaders any more than we can specify rigid and exact qualifications for individual therapists. Perhaps we can arrive at some general description of the kinds of persons who would be most effective as group leaders. These criteria could involve ethics, training, and emotional stability. There must, however, be some consideration given to the possibility that different kinds of groups might require leaders with different kinds of skills, qualities, and personalities.

It is understandable that in any profession, vocation, or general behavioral response, we are motivated to perform in order to satisfy certain needs. With this in mind, it is frightening to speculate what disastrous outcomes might result in a group in which the novice or untrained leader has little or no understanding of his own needs, defenses, motivations, or attitudes, and uses the group as a means of satisfying these needs that ought to be met elsewhere.

III. *What do people want from the group experience? After confrontation with one another and when defenses have been stripped away, how do we follow through with the experience so that the group members receive something constructive?*

Several writers have expressed concern about the outcomes of confrontation sessions in which quiet feelings are evoked among participants and of situations in which the leader has focused more upon techniques and processes than upon outcomes. These concerns also include the misuse of training and the responsibility of the leader to learn about the people in his group before he leads them into a deep, emotional experience.

The outcomes of the group experience, whether T-group, encounter group, or whatever, seem to hinge upon the leader's ability to understand what is going on and to know when it is necessary to provide support, clarification, or some other constructive element.

It is not sufficient simply to be skilled in helping members of the group strip away one another's defenses without being able to help them develop some other satisfactory means of coping with their environment. Some individuals may come into the group with only a minimal defense set. If this is destroyed in the group, what do we expect of their plight when they leave the group if no help is given so that they may adequately cope with life outside the group?

Certainly, a number of writers⁶ emphasize that some of the prime outcomes of the group experience should be that of understanding one's behavior and the behavior of others, developing more appropriate means of interacting with others and accepting one's self, as well as helping normal people recognize their problems and solve them before they become serious. This requires skill on the part of a leader, and a knowledge of pathology, learning theory and human behavior in general.

Furthermore, the word "understanding," on the part of the group member, involves more than just observing or grasping cognitively. It includes the comfortable incorporation of this observation or cognition into the individual's system of responses so that it becomes a part of him. Indeed, he could conceivably be worse prepared to deal with life if, as an outcome of his group experience, he came to know what motivated his behavior and observed what effect his behavior had on others, or vice versa, and yet did not come to terms with it:

If awareness is really deep or comprehensive the perceiver may discover much that is horrible in himself and in his world.⁷

No matter how well trained a leader is nor how ethical his behavior, his group could produce some disintegrated individuals. It seems imperative that we take as many precautions as we can to avoid this. The leader must be perceptive to indications of trouble and skilled at helping members of the group to define limits and integrate themselves.

Conclusions

A great deal of research is being done in the field of group experience. However, much still remains to be learned in three major areas: (1) Which people can benefit most from which kinds of

groups? (2) What qualities are relevant for leaders of psychological and educational groups that tamper with human emotions? (3) What is the *raison d'être* of different kinds of groups and what are the expected outcomes of group experiences?

References

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