

Equality in Encounter Groups

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The many types of group activities loosely labeled as "encounter" or "sensitivity" owe their existence partially to reactions against the cultural preoccupation with hyperindividuality at the expense of mutuality (O'Connell, 1970). The time-honored de-emphasis upon cooperation-as-equals has spawned this variety of here-and-now verbal and nonverbal techniques which, for the most part, operate without the benefit of logical theoretical considerations. Some encounters only emphasize narcissistic catharsis and lack clinical knowledge as to when such techniques are inappropriate. Other groups wallow in looking for the "real" reasons of behavior, using the hopeless search as a form of one-upmanship ("My fourth ear is better than your third."). Still others try to isolate the self in group, a form of intrapsychic voyage that Dr. Dreikurs calls "psychological masturbation."

Traditional Feedback

Yet, in spite of unsuccessful attempts to maintain instant group joy, there are signs that a seed of democratic process thinking is inherent in some kinds of encounters. The concept of "Feedback" is a prime example of incipient concern for the "other" which Adlerians could help to nurture by their affinity for social interest as the hallmark of maturity. Constructive feedback focuses upon the healing potential present in interpersonal transactions and is superior to narrow concepts of theories which overemphasize "inner" terms (libido, collective unconscious) or "outer" factors (reinforcement). Rather than wholly discount all encounter movements, Adlerians can assist in the democratization of sensitivity groups by searching for aspects of encounter by dialogue.

The concept of feedback presents such an opportunity. Feedback is one of the teachings of the Human Relations (or Patients') Training Laboratory, and Action Therapy is often used as a vehicle for feedback practice (Hanson, Rothaus, O'Connell, and Wiggins, 1969, 1970). The laboratory is a unique workshop (psychiatric ward) in which treatment is built around "leaderless" development groups of patients. The integration of Action Therapy, Adlerian-oriented psychodramatic techniques, has been described earlier in this journal (O'Connell, 1967). The conditions for effective feedback as given by Hanson (1966) are as follows: (a) describing of specific units of overt behavior in contrast to judging the person for "latent" qualities; (b) feedback should be close in time to the behavior which, ideally, is seen by others; (c) authentic feedback, not forced on others, should be motivated by a desire to help; (d) the recipient has freedom of choice to accept or reject the information, and (e) only

behavior which a person can control should be included in feedback. The goals of symptoms and the necessity of group discussion of logical consequences are not mentioned (Dreikurs and Grey, 1968).

Adlerian Feedback

Constructive feedback could be considered as an operational definition of social interest in the here-and-now. (Social interest has additional temporal implications—past and future—which are not measured solely by here-and-now feedback.) To qualify as Adlerian, conceptual changes in authentic feedback would have to take place. For example, behavior included in feedback restricted to that which the recipient has under control is meaningless to the Adlerian for all goal-directed behavior is potentially within one's control. It would be better to have the qualification read, "Don't demand immediate change;" and "Ask what you can do to assist in the behavioral change, assuming the person *wants* to change." A real Adlerian addition would be, "Anticipate the response of the recipient to your feedback and communicate that *guess* to him." This movement is truly "spitting in the soup" and "taking the wind out of the sails." If patients guess-and-tell purposes of misbehavior when uncooperative moves are "habitually" made, there is less reliance on disturbance-creating attention, power, revenge, and special service plays. Above all, such maneuvers of misbehaviors must not be rewarded: the group must not reinforce, by fight or flight, noncooperative goals, which are really *demands* upon others. To add to the democratic openness the giver of feedback should then ask for feedback to the feedback he has given, instead of assuming (autocratically) that his contribution is "reality" and is automatically received as sent.

Example. Joe: Ed, may I tell you how I feel when you leave the room just when I start to talk?

Ed: Go ahead! I was just looking for the doctor to find out about sick call. So what?

Joe: Well, I will. But in the past when anyone has been honest with you, this upset you and you started a fight.

Ed: When? Damn you. . . . Or, I want to hear.

Joe: I think the only way you feel like you belong in this group is by upsetting the group process. You've never had any practice in cooperating. We have only two more weeks to work on what's bugging us. If you don't open up and level with us what are we all going to do? You're a wonderful group wrecker . . . Am I right?

Ed: (Silence . . . then quietly . . .) Yes. . . . I need plenty of help.

A final point here. Encouragement is not mentioned in the traditional feedback conditions. Adlerian encouragement or "stroking" (O'Connell, 1967) communicates worth and decision-making ability to the receiver. A sign that such a view is lacking in here-and-now encounters is to be found in the reactions to weeping in these groups. It is almost ritualistic that participants touch and rub

the weeper and perhaps reinforce the weeper's asocial goals—along with their own. Adlerians, I assume, will let the weeper cry as part of the dignity of decision-making, at least until it habitually disrupts group cooperation. Adlerians verbally reinforce efforts at cooperation and only reward persons by nonverbal looking and listening. (The person earns reward simply from being.) Through such operations the accent is upon the honest and mutual communication with others, which is the royal road to increasing one's self-esteem and social interest.

Summary

Many Adlerians find sensitivity or encounter groups offensive because of the latter's excessive faith in catharsis alone. The life style cannot change if a person continues to try to maximize his self-esteem by alternative "private logic" behaviors. Incipient concern for the other (social interest) is seen in the concept of authentic feedback, used by the more theoretical and democratic encounter groups. Adlerian contributions to the growth of feedback would emphasize that feedback can be encouraging; that all goal-directed behavior is purposive; that the receiver's response should be openly anticipated; that feedback-to-feedback should be invited.

References

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