

SENSITIVITY TRAINING AND ADLERIAN THEORY¹

WALTER E. O'CONNELL²

Veterans Administration Hospital, Houston, Texas

This paper is a beginning attempt to plot an Adlerian position and course with respect to the burgeoning group phenomena of the last few years. To clarify our terms at the outset, let us state that sensitivity training will denote the entire field of encounter and similar therapy groups. This will include the human relations laboratory groups which are usually differentiated from the short-term encounter groups by more carefully constructed instruments and exercises to identify crucial elements of group life, rather than reliance solely on the expertise of group leaders (8). In the laboratory groups leadership may emerge from the interplay of the individual life styles within the group (D-groups, for developmental), or leaders may be engaged as "trainers" or facilitators who catalyze the group activities by nonverbal techniques and here-and-now interpretations (T-groups, for trainer-led).

These differences in composition and task of the groups are of minor significance, however, compared to the difference in their purpose. The thesis of this paper is, specifically, that the real and far-reaching distinction between groups is whether they are implicitly motivated by goals of release-of-drives or of learning-to-be-human.

MERITS OF SENSITIVITY TRAINING IN GENERAL

No search-and-destroy attack on the sensitivity-encounter group movement is herein intended. Any phenomenon labeled by ultra-reactionary individuals as part of "the conspiratorial Left" (2), and "the devil's three-pronged fork—sex, drugs, and sensitivity training" (6) can't be all wrong. Extreme resistances to the encounter movement often serve as a vehicle for displaced and projected urges, for some of its most vocal critics have read little about such groups and have experienced even less (7). In our fragmented and dehumanized

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²Author's address: as above, Zip 77031.

world of obsessive-compulsive hyperindividuality, any skin-stretching to include concern for others as equals will run afoul of authoritarian fears and dictates.

The social movement of which sensitivity training is a part is a rebellion against the cultural preoccupation with abstract, analytical, and there-and-then modes of conceptualizing man. In this sense, the movement's here-and-now focus has much in common with Adlerian theory. The leaderless developmental groups (D-groups) and even the trainer-led groups (T-groups) have a democratic potentiality for mutual respect so foreign to orthodox psychoanalytic theory. There is an air of optimism in the approach of the human relations laboratory and the therapeutic methods of Individual Psychology.

It may be that more tolerance and understanding for therapeutic innovations would follow from viewing these efforts with a sense of historical time (9). From the days of the early Greeks there has been a continuing, albeit relatively faint, puzzlement about man's growth-inspiring actions (10, 16). *Philia*, *eros*, and *agape*, three traditional types of love, can be considered nodal points on a continuum of positive approach behaviors. As such they correspond to various strategies and goals of 20th century psychotherapy. *Philia*, or friendship, is still the initial subgoal of most types of individual and group psychotherapy; a multilateral groping for friendship or relatedness is the hallmark of the entire group movement. *Eros*, or the drive toward interpersonal union, is one aim of the sensitivity or encounter movement which seeks to realize it primarily on the nonverbal level of communication. *Agape*, or the selfless brotherly concern for others, is the aim of Adlerian groups, who seek to realize it through understanding on the cognitive level.

"DRIVE" RELEASE GROUPS

Essential points separate the Adlerian hoping to promote the spirit of *agape* from the "pseudospontaneity of the turner-onners" (14), the instant-*eros* bunch. An Adlerian would operate out of a theory of the life style and be subject to the label of "intellectual" by those who foster a dualism between thought and feeling. An Adlerian, of course, believes that feeling is a reaction to one's thoughts, all in the service of life-style goals. The popularized "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice" type of trainer appears to be almost anti-intellectual, seeing thought and feeling as separate domains and opting

for the latter. Meaning is sought after through catharsis in a release of emotions (11, 12).

Implicit encounter group assumptions, more characteristic of Esalen than Bethel, seem to be based on a Lockean view of man: the individual being shaped by exposure to external forces (3). An Adlerian with a more pronounced Leibnitzian bent will see the active individual creating wily maneuvers in accordance with his life style, to gain such ends as approval, intellectual and moral superiority, dependency, control, and abuse. Therefore the prime therapeutic aim is not release of repressed love and hate, but expanding self-esteem simultaneously with social interest.

Popularized sensitivity training in practice is often a quickie-type "psychoanalysis," using social "objects" to gain release of hidden positive and negative drives. This type of trainer may seek an immediate (almost magic) solution to problems. His here-and-now emphasis seldom acknowledges purposes and gains of the participant's arbitrary demands upon *others*. Too little emphasis is placed on understanding the life style of the other (as in role reversal) and practicing the giving and receiving of feedback in a democratic manner.

In a sense one's body can be considered an inferior organ, for it is too often the focus of excessive attention. The poorly-led here-and-now sensitivity group reinforces the neurotic behavior of the self-centered person by existing mainly to have him experience his own sensations, talk about them, and attack others, verbally or physically in a fit of "honesty." Real honesty can prosper only in a group of equals in the mutuality of feedback without demands.

If the leader facilitates the democratic ethos, a person can learn a great deal about his arbitrary demands and untoward reactions. Unfortunately, encounter groups have often been directed toward cathartic-touch-and-tell only. In the desperate effort to transcend our culturally conditioned skin-tight identities, groups have failed to examine their premises and demanded instant ecstasy and nirvana by crying, touching, wrestling, and other regressive actions. There is often an un verbalized contest for power in the struggle to be the greatest weeper, toucher, or confessor. They "strive for spontaneity" and a feeling of "down-loose rather than uptight" (17). According to Ryckoff (15), culmination of "our terrible need really to know each other" will be "a mutual Proctoscopy group . . . comfortably arranged around the swimming pool in the end-chest position, peering into each others' colons" (p. 206).

Human relations laboratories well-grounded in democratic principles do not violate human dignity as do those dominated by hippiephrenic *demands*.

ADLERIAN SENSE-ABILITY TRAINING

All behavior is purposive to Adlerians, and therefore, "telling it like it is" is also closely connected to goals. The decisive factor is whether the goal is imbued with social interest or not, i.e., whether it is a goal of cooperation, or a less mature goal of attention, power, revenge, or the hidden demands for special service. It is the goals of here-and-now behavior that are examined by Adlerians. For encounter groups of other orientations it is extremely rare to advance beyond descriptive labels. For example, a participant may be given feedback that others are disturbed because he is "over-reacting." No effort is then made to examine the person's self-esteem, social interest, and the hidden goals of his "over-reacting." When Adlerian methodology uses action techniques the focus is upon insight and oversight into the purposes of behavior. Oversight is the learned ability to see, hear, and feel along with others. This social process, the basic element of warm relationships, prevents the reactive dis-ease of arbitrary demands. Oversight is as important as insight and neither concept is divorced from the other. Professed love or understanding is not accepted on the verbal level only ("trust only movement"). Social change is demonstrated by practicing new behaviors and oversights and decreasing hidden and rationalized arbitrary demands.

Social interest is not synonymous with social conformity but connotes a feeling of intimate belonging to the full spectrum of humanity: past, present, and future. With such a life style the person does not suffer from alienation and loneliness, the hallmark of mental disturbances. When social interest is examined and tried, after all other diversions fail, the royal road to the rarest human virtue, agape, will be found. In our pre-Christian times agape still remains untried. Agape, selfless love, is the way to superiority without distancing from others, hiding one's feelings, and flogging the self for spurious self-esteem. Agape is not a fleeting by-product of the encounter (11, 12). Its goal is to put one's self in the other's situation. Encouraging the other, in this ideal state, would be as natural as "breathing and the upright gait" (1) because there would be no neurotic need to elevate the self by depreciating others. One can learn, by receiving encouragement and well-intentioned feedback,

the extent and damage of one's arbitrary demands. Then the search for a modicum of puny esteem (all the individual believes he can get) through attention-getting, power striving, revenge struggles, or a display of inadequacy is no longer pressing. In democratic groups a loving atmosphere is engendered by "letting-be."

To illustrate: In some sensitivity groups the silent withdrawn individual might be told suddenly to try to break into the group, the other members linking hands to keep him out. This nonverbal exercise would perhaps take place with little ensuing comment on the purpose of the withdrawal or the underlying pathology of self-esteem and social interest. In the Adlerian sense-ability training, the silent one would not be forced to do anything. The other participants might talk about their feelings about his silence, its presumed goals, what the silent one selectively perceives and tells himself to create and maintain his silence, and how he actively rejects his own potential and that of others. If his peers demand activity, that becomes their problem—also to be shared and studied. In Action Therapy (Adlerian psychodrama techniques), each participant can mirror another's explicit and implicit life style i.e., his behavior and his cognitive selectivities, but only with his permission. One asks his permission, and if he refuses, one may openly reflect on this, but one does not see oneself as an omnipotent or an isolated judge. For example one may say, "My guess is that Joe is trying so hard to be perfect that he's afraid he'll fail if he says anything. I wish I could help him and the group, but if he won't now share, that's his decision. What do you think?"

The person then learns the logical consequences of his choices, no longer disguised as necessary and externally conditioned actions. Such a group does not exist for the shock value of stimulating and creating unlikely situations. There is more to be examined in the fears and demands of daily existence without contrived disrobing and physical attacks. Regressive behavior can be fun, but social interest grows from incorporating a democratic theory and practice of understanding the other.

The Adlerian system works in a social-learning frame of reference, dealing with the depth factors of "why" and "how" a person maintains low self-esteem and low social interest, with the goal of raising both interdependently. The therapist aims at becoming a significant other to the patient through verbal and nonverbal expressions of belonging and worth. It is assumed that the therapist already has a well-developed sense of *philia*, so the task is a unilateral bond of friendship, patient to therapist.

According to the Beechers (4), "One of the more pathetic or amusing levels of *eros* friendship amounts to mutual baby sitting of one adult by another" (p. 103). "Agape . . . is entirely nonposses-

sive and demands nothing for itself. It does not judge, discriminate, evaluate" (p. 93).

The well-functioning Adlerian psychotherapist, no matter what the label of his activity, personifies this agape-in-action. Ideally, he shows agape toward all, for this behavior is synonymous with social interest. But the movements of agape are not those of the touch-and-tell sensitivity groups. Agape is demandless love, akin to equality (5). Agape (and social interest) sees the self and others as of incomparable worth and always able to make decisions. The Adlerian is open to give and receive feedback. He guesses at the reaction of the person with whom he is about to be open and authentic. Since he is not dependent upon this person (the eros-motive is not operating) he can risk honesty. Even when a patient becomes so actively or passively violent that verbal dialogue of psychotherapy is precluded, agape is still viable as long as the therapist does not show in verbal or motoric behavior that he is labeling the patient eternally hopeless and helpless. The Adlerian does not forget that the world turns on the eros-motive and teaches his client that if he wants to be esteemed by his agape-less friends, he'd do well to be prepared to confirm them in the way that they unwittingly demand.

Laboratory group methods using the Adlerian approach offer an immediate here-and-now interpersonal diagnosis, shared by all, and not divorced from treatment. For example, the participant feels and inadvertently shows his anxiety (and ways of dealing with such) when faced with the culturally atypical task of merely looking at another face. In well-conducted democratic groups the participant can experience the frustrations of not being able to use habitual ways of evaluating and devaluating self and others to gain self-esteem. He can experience the beauty and awe of coming "back to his senses," untethered by the need for "negative nonsense."

The oft repeated right-wing claim that the essence of sensitivity training is a substituting of the will and judgment of the group for that of the individual has not been shown in research on democratic human relations laboratories (13). In fact, the opposite has been true. The patient's self-esteem has increased and he has become less dependent on the group.

SUMMARY

The popular yet amorphous movement called sensitivity and encounter groups has superficial similarities with the Adlerian

approach, more generally so when the innovative groups have democratic leaders and atmospheres. While the usual sensitivity trainer and the Adlerian therapist share optimism, a distrust of autocratic depersonalization, and the aim to extend interpersonal relatedness, in practice their implicit assumptions and methodologies differ strikingly. Whereas release-of-drives is primarily the goal of many encounter groups, practice and growth of self-acceptance in a harmonious and democratic understanding of and interaction with others is the goal of Adlerian-oriented groups. Encouragement and feedback, based on the leader's offer of friendship, in an atmosphere of mutual respect as well as honesty, minimizes acting-out for narrow self-centered needs and the overwhelming of the person by power-driven group participants. Giving and receiving feedback with psychodramatic techniques is practicing courage, and overcomes the habitual distancing from others in the service of faulty self-esteem. The individual is given the chance to see himself as others do, and is encouraged to choose between offered alternatives.

A socio-historical approach to the sensitivity-encounter movement would elicit more tolerance and understanding. It appears as a reaction to our age of obsessive-compulsive hyperindividuality, and like all compensatory movements, often overshoots its mark. Philosophically, its roots lie in Lockean tradition, overemphasizing the power of external agents in precipitating change. Although all groups are seeking *philia*, some form of friendship, each in their own way, sensitivity groups have a close affinity with the *eros*-motive, in their striving for instant relatedness which all too quickly fades in "postlab depressions." The encounter movement fails to tap the secret of *agape*: the demandless concern for the other. The Adlerian group expresses *agape* in its endeavor to understand the life style of the other and enabling him to modify it.

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