Peter Smith

WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF BEING IN AN ENCOUNTER GROUP?

In recent years, a bewildering array of group experiences has become available to those seeking personal growth. Brochures of growth centres lay out an ever-increasing list of esoterically-named possibilities, whether it be bioenergetics, 'gestalt therapy', psychodrama, re-evaluation co-counselling or one of many others. It is always possible to lump all these labels together and refer to the whole development as the human potential movement or the encounter movement, but this is only a first step in understanding what's going on. One wants to know what are the effects of being in any of these groups. It's quite possible that the varying labels make no difference to what one actually experiences in a group. On the other hand it's equally possible that the effects of one approach are totally different from that of another.

One way of answering this kind of question is to participate in all the different kinds of groups in turn. This could prove personally rewarding, but as a way of establishing firm generalisations about groups it leaves much to be desired. Firstly, how one reacts to groups is a function of the kind of person one is, so that what you find really valuable may leave someone else cold. Secondly, the order in which you go to the different experiences would be very important. Your later experiences would obviously be coloured one way or another by what happened in the earlier ones. What is needed is some more systematic study. Participants in the encounter movement are often more than a little suspicious of attempts at 'objective' research. They point out that the essence of encounter experiences is subjective, so that 'objective' studies will miss the point. It is my belief that 'subjective' and 'objective' are not true opposites. One can make an objective study of some aspects of subjective experience, and especially one can make a study of the consequences of that experience.

For some years now, studies have been available showing that the more orthodox types of group experience, such as T-groups, can have lasting beneficial effects on many participants. In this article I shall be discussing an attempt by three American researchers to extend these studies to include a variety of encounter groups. Their findings will appear as a book in due course, but this discussion is based on three academic papers they have already published. The project was conducted at Stanford University in California, by Matt Miles, Mort Lieberman and Irv Yalom. They asked eighteen of the best known group leaders in the San Francisco area each to conduct a 30 hour group with Stanford students. The group could be run in whatever manner the leader wished and could either be held as a single non-stop marathon meeting or spaced over a number of weeks. 209 students participated in the groups and the effects on them were compared with changes in another 69 who did not attend. Research observers attended the group meetings and participants were also asked to complete various questionnaires during and after the groups.

The researcher's overall conclusions were that one third of the students benefitted

from the groups in a way which was still apparent six months after the groups, one third showed no lasting effect and the remaining third either dropped out part-way through (19%) or were adversely affected (8%). These are very striking findings both in terms of the low proportion who showed beneficial effects and the relatively high proportion who showed adverse effects. By way of comparison, the studies of T-groups have found around two-thirds of members showing lasting benefit and negligible numbers adversely affected. There are many possible reasons why such different effects should have been found in the Stanford study. For example, as the leaders were a very diverse selection, it is quite possible that each was achieving a different effect, so that overall the different kinds of effect average out. Another possibility is that the leaders failed to adapt their methods to the needs of the students in the group. A third possibility is that the groups did not do too well precisely because they were being researched. Finally one would wish to examine the ways the researchers measured the effects so as to be sure that the comparison between group members and non-participants is a fair one.

The researchers found that the labels by which the leaders identified themselves ('personal growth', 'T-group', 'gestalt', etc) was not in fact a useful guide as to how they behaved. Consequently they made up their own list of seven leader 'types' and classified the leaders according to how they actually did behave. The seven types were described as follows:

A. 'ENERGISERS': these were highly active, dominating, demanding leaders who emanated warmth and at the same time controlled what happened in the group to a high degree. (Of these leaders, two described themselves as Gestalt therapists, one as a psychodramatist and two as Synanon leaders.)

B: 'PROVIDERS': caring, individually-focussed leaders, more benevolent than A. (One T-group leader, one marathon-eclectic, one transactional-analyst.)

C. 'SOCIAL ENGINEERS': less active than A or B, they focussed more on steering the group as a whole. (One T-group leader, one Rogerian, one psychodramatist).

D. 'LAISSEZ-FAIRE': these leaders made only very occasional general comments about ways in which people learn. (One psychoanalyst and one transactional analyst).

E. 'COOL AGGRESSIVE STIMULATORS': aggressive, but less so than A. They provided neither warmth nor authoritarian structure. (Two personal growth leaders).

F. 'HIGH STRUCTURE': used an average of 8 structured exercises per meeting, in a controlling authoritarian manner. (One sensory awareness-Esalen leader).

G. 'ENCOUNTERTAPES': these are a prerecorded set of instructions which are used in place of a leader. They encourage warmth and support. (Two groups).

These seven leader types were indeed found to achieve markedly different results. The researchers have so far only published detail of the differences found between the groups run by leaders of types A and B. Participants in Type A groups were the most enthusiastic at the close of the group. Six months later a third of them had changed their minds. Type B members were also favourable towards their experience and they showed much less tendency to change their minds later. Group A members were more likely to report 'peak-experiences'; they also decreased their self-esteem, saw themselves as less mentally healthy, saw others in less complicated ways and liked

them less. By way of contrast, members of B groups increased their self-esteem, saw themselves as more healthy, saw others in more complex ways and liked them better. Finally 17% of Type A group members were regarded by the researchers as casualties, whereas only 3% of group B members were so classified. Another 17% of group A members dropped out during the meetings, whereas dropouts from B groups were 8%.

These findings clearly show that the way the group leader behaves makes a great deal of difference to what is the effect of the group. In choosing a group, one would be well advised to pay attention not only to the way the leader labels his expertise, but also to how he is known to behave in his groups.

This large variability between the groups provides a plausible explanation as to why the overall proportion of those who benefitted was so low. If some groups were very successful and others were not, the average success rate will not be high.

It was suggested earlier that some leaders failed to adapt their behaviour to the needs of their group members. Perhaps the clearest instance of this is provided by a quote from a Type A leader in whose group no less than three casualties were diagnosed. He is reported as describing his group as 'too infantile to take responsibility for themselves and to form an adult contract. I saw that most of the group didn't want to do anything, so what I did was just go ahead and have a good time myself.' Such attitudes are fortunately not widespread among leaders.

Another possibility to be discussed is that the groups were disturbed by the fact of their being researched. This criticism is quickly eliminated by the knowledge that some of the groups did very well. Whatever causes the success or failure must be something intrinsic to particular groups, rather than something shared between them all, such as the research.

Perhaps the striking aspect of the Stanford project is the researchers' emphasis on the occurrence of 'casualties'. There has been no shortage over the years of critics who allege that groups are dangerous or damaging. These reports are the first adequately researched publications to give these critics' fears some firm basis. As such they command attention. Casualties were defined as those who suffered some persistent 'psychological decompensation' which was attributable to the group. Among group members there were 8% who were classified in this manner, compared with 3% among those who did not participate in a group. The researchers used a wide variety of procedures to identify casualties. Unfortunately there appears to be a flaw in their procedures. Among those who were not in groups , the casualty rate was taken simply as those who entered therapy during the relevant six months. No details are given of further enquiries being made among the non-group members. On the other hand, among group members the procedure was quite different. Some students who entered therapy were not defined as casualties, on the basis of interviews with researchers. Most of them indicated that they were seeking therapy both from the encounter group and from psychotherapy. The one experience did not lead to the other, but rather both experiences were attempts by the students to work on their problems. Conversely, a number of group members who did not enter psychotherapy were nonetheless classified as casualties on the basis of follow-up interviews. Thus the figures for casualties among those who did and did not participate in groups were collected in different ways and are non-comparable. The 'casualties' of the encounter groups ranged from some who certainly experienced severe distress to others who felt badly, but were not so

incapacitated that they sought therapeutic assistance.

A more valid comparison might be based on how many of the group casualties were sufficiently distressed that they entered therapy. Seven of the 209 group members met this requirement. This is 3% or the same rate as was found among those who were not in groups. Of course this may be an underestimate as the researchers did not succeed in contacting all their suspected casualties. But they were more likely to have succeeded with the severe ones. According to the argument advanced here, the proposition that these encounter groups were damaging is not proven. Student life involves a good deal of mental distress for quite a few, and there is no clear evidence that there was any more of it among the group members than among the non-group members.

Even if casualties are no more frequent than in the rest of life, it is still of great interest to know in what types of group they occurred. The seven severe casualties were spread between three types of group leader, the energisers, the laissez-faire and the cool aggressive stimulators. These same group leaders were also the ones who had high drop-out rates from their groups, although there was no tendency for drop-outs to be casualties. Rather it seems that people protected themselves by dropping out. The damaging groups then were those where the leaders were cool and distant or else very aggressive or else both of these combined. Where the leaders showed warmth, there were no severe casualties.

This discussion has laid more emphasis on the hazards of encounter groups than it has on the benefits. This is primarily because the Stanford researchers have not published all their findings on the favourable side of the picture yet. It is perhaps worthwhile to reiterate that 75% of the group members saw positive changes in themselves immediately after their groups, and that many of these retained this view months later. The Stanford project may well turn out to have been extremely fruitful in identifying some of the aspects of group experience which are most likely to promote and make more durable those beneficial changes. Their subsequent reports should be full of interest. As further studies become available, it will be possible to see how much their conclusions hold up for groups held in other kinds of settings.

Humanistic Psychology

Humanistic psychology, the Third Force, takes people out of the laboratory and out of the patient-doctor relationship and gives them ultimate responsibility in solving their own problems and determining their own ways of growth.

It can be viewed as a coalescence of many sources: (1) Adler, Rank, Jung; (2) Marcuse, Norman Brown, Wheeler, Szasz, Schachtel; (3) Goldstein and his organic psychology; and the so-called personality psychologists, such as Gordon Allport, Gardner Murphy, Moreno and Murray. From these have come the 'growth' psychologists and sociologists: Rogers, Perls, Maslow, Fromm, Schutz, Frankl, Jourard, Goffman, Erikson, Laing.

Humanistic psychology looks up to people rather than looking down on them. Rogers says - 'When we are able to free the individual from defensiveness, so that he is open to the wide range of environmental and social demands, his reactions may be trusted to be positive,

forward-moving, constructive.' His definition of adjustment is complete openness to experience. Perls says that rather than try to change, stop, or avoid something that you don't like in yourself, it is much more effective to experience fully and become more deeply aware of it. You can't improve on your own functioning, you can only interfere with it, distort it and disguise it. When you really get in touch with your own experiencing, you will find that change takes place by itself, without your effort or planning. Maslow says that he sees people as living organisms with an inherent need to grow or change. This is their intrinsic motivation - it does not derive from other needs. And it leads to self-actualisation - a never-ending process of going into the self and going beyond the self. Maslow studied ecstasy, creativity and transpersonal experience and not just everyday functioning.

But humanistic psychology is a praxis, rather than a theory in the old sense. It has developed considerably through the activities of the growth centres, the prototype of which is the Esalen Institute which was founded in Big Sur, California in 1962. These centres are currently established all over the United States and have spread to England and Western Europe (and also to the Far East) in the last three years.

A growth centre offers encounter, Gestalt therapy, bio-energetics, psychodrama, massage and so on, and even some Eastern disciplines such as Yoga and Tai Chi. All these are ways of approaching the openness to experience - for what is going on in oneself - which we have seen is fundamental to humanistic psychology. And even the briefest acquaintance with them makes it clear that this is no reversion to introspection. The techniques are extremely behaviour-oriented, or to put it more accurately, action-oriented. Encounter provides an atmosphere of support within which people can get in touch with their feelings and openly and honestly express them to one another. Since feelings reside in the body, and not only in the head, you are encouraged to express yourself with your body as much as possible. The psychologist who understands this process finds himself looking at himself and his subjects, and the relation between the two, in a new way. The subjects have become more real to him because he has become more real to himself. But the experimental set-up and even the theory he was testing may now begin to seem very much less real.

So humanistic psychology is not to be taken up lightly. It bears very heavily on one of the key difficulties of psychology pointed out by George Kelly - the question of reflexivity; the question of how the psychologist's theory applies to the psychologist's own activities.

WHAT IS THE AHP?

The Association for Humanistic Psychology was started by Abraham Maslow in the early 1960's and quickly developed both in the academic world and in the growth centres. In the United States, it publishes the Journal of Humanistic Psychology and a number of other publications. Last year a new division of the American

Psychological Association was formed - the Division of Humanistic Psychology.
Psychology.

In this country, the AHP began in 1969 and the first chairman was John Wren-Lewis. It is run as a grouping of interested people, and is not a professional organisation: there are no qualifications for membership. It produces a bulletin which has now reached its third issue, and has run a number of experiential meetings attended by people from all over the world. We hope to use these pages regularly to communicate with our own members and anyone else who is interested.

A conference is being arranged by the AHP in association with other interested groups in 1973 to go into the whole question of how the intellect is separated from the rest of the person in higher education, and how the teacher is separated from the learner. This will not be only about humanistic psychology, but will be humanistic psychology in action, in the way the conference is run. Further details will appear nearer the time.

It is also intended to try to set up a school-teachers' network for people who are trying to introduce humanistic approaches into the classroom. Teachers would meet in small local groups to encourage and stimulate each other, and explore their own reluctance to go further. A package of introductory material could be provided, consisting of lists of books, films and tapes, accounts of other people's experiences, and exercises for use in the small groups themselves. Any teachers who are interested are invited to write in for details.

Another area in which the AHP is active is in psychotherapy. Psychologists often play a very dubious part in mental hospitals, being a party to the invalidation of persons which takes place through labelling. Humanistic psychologists are trying to move out of this area and into a real attempt to face people as people, not as patients.

In fact, humanistic psychology is relevant to almost every field of human endeavour.