

THE ENCOUNTER EXPERIENCE

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'Encounter is an experiencing, feeling situation and must be experienced to be understood'. This definition or anti-definition is taken from the programme of one of the growth centres offering the encounter experience to the public. Indeed, explaining what encounter is to someone who has never been in an encounter group is virtually impossible. The purpose of this brief article is to tackle that impossible task, with apologies for the inadequacy of words.

Encounter groups have been called 'play therapy for adults'. By providing a setting in which there are no outside distractions - no work to be done, no tasks to be performed, no telephones to be answered, no appointments - the participants find themselves more or less back to where they were when they were children. By excluding external reference points (power, prestige, status and professional roles) the encounter group puts people squarely into a situation where all they have is their inner, intrinsic, physical self and their human resources. It is a regressive experience, the opportunity to re-experience oneself as a child - with all the joys and pains that children know so well and which adults have very often forgotten.

Groups differ in their duration, their intensity, their composition and their function or purpose. They may consist of five or fifty people, last for an afternoon or several days - with or without sleep - be open to all comers or specifically designed for certain categories of people (men or women only, couples, millionaires, specific vocational groups) or intended to deal with special problems.

The underlying premise of encounter groups is that neuroses and psychoses are the consequences of not expressing our feelings. As a person learns to express his feelings (and, further, to feel his feelings) he will become healthier and more alive. One woman after a 3½-day group reported experiencing 'so much emotion - exhilaration at having been able to fight things out, tell people what I thought of them, lash about with sarcasm, physical blows etc., resentment at attacks on me - people jeering at my ideas and my way of expressing them.'

The encounter group has no goals and no pre-set agenda. The traditional imperatives of psychotherapy ('maturity', 'adjustment', 'normality', 'functioning') are considered to be false and artificially imposed values.

Nor do encounter groups cater to people who are 'sick' or disturbed. The participants are the normals and normal neurotics who make up the bulk of the population. Their goal is human growth and personal development.

The encounter group dispenses with interpretation, at least in the causal, why-explaining, etiological sense. The idea that one can adequately explain human behaviour and interpret why someone feels or behaves as he does is considered a myth, the myth of conditioning. The human being is more than the discernible influences that have been exerted upon him. Consequently the only interpretation in encounter groups is phenomenological: what a person actually said or did, in the actual concrete situation. The attempt to interpret or to attribute motivations to others is contemptuously condemned as 'mind-fucking' or brain-washing. Whenever a participant in a group does interpret the behaviour of others he is usually told to 'stop acting like a psychiatrist'.

The corollary of this is that observers are out of place in an encounter group. By diagnosing the behaviour of others, one misses out on what the group has to offer.

The emphasis on direct experience and feeling requires heightened awareness. In fact some people think they should be called 'awareness groups'. By awareness is meant, primarily, awareness of one's own feelings and this includes bodily sensations such as warmth, cold, the flow of adrenalin, energy changes, breath, nausea, vertigo, and so on. Awareness should extend to inner processes, especially muscular tensions and depth of breathing. Encounter group leaders often introduce relaxation and breathing exercises. Instruction in a dyadic situation (two participants sitting facing one another) might be, 'Look at your partner and be aware of what you are feeling and of how your partner makes you feel. If you can't look and feel at the same time, look away and breathe until you feel centred again. Try to become aware of where you feel tense.' In such awareness exercises, participants often realise that they have virtually stopped breathing.

The advent of the encounter group must be seen in context: a world of great technological, economic and scientific progress where people no longer know their next-door neighbours, rarely see relatives other than to exchange greetings, live in small nuclear families, have few close friends, keep diaries and go to psychoanalysts.

The leader (or facilitator) in an encounter group plays a very different role from that of the psychiatrist or psychoanalyst, and may not be 'professionally' qualified. He refuses the role of policeman and possibly even of lifeguard. It is up to each participant to influence what happens in the group, with the obvious risk that others will oppose him.

The group leader influences but does not control. He has many tools or modes of working at his disposal. Among them are fantasy and the guided day-dream, psychodrama and Gestalt, bodywork and bio-energetics, the use of art materials and dance and music therapy, cognitive elaboration, various types of dyadic structures, re-evaluation counselling or pattern-breaking techniques, non-verbal interaction and incarnation.

The use of fantasy or inner imagery has been borrowed by encounter primarily from two therapists, Hanscarl Leuner and Robert Desoille. The participant is asked to close his eyes, breathe deeply, and to report what he sees. If he sees nothing, the group leader may suggest an appropriate image to start the fantasy: following the course of a stream, climbing up a mountain, the emergence of a figure from a cave, looking through an old picture book. In the course of experiencing his fantasy, which the participant shares with the entire group, he goes through many real bodily changes such as squirming, sweating, fear, tension, terror and usually, at the end, relaxation and pleasure. The reason the use of fantasy works is, according to Schutz, because *'Each individual problem may be understood as a blockage of energy impeding the successful completion of a flow cycle; the blockage is physical, emotional, intellectual, and probably spiritual.'* By easing one of the blocks, fantasy allows the others to be loosened as well. Using psychodrama, the group may enact traumas from childhood or current conflict situations. One person plays the boss, another a subordinate - whatever the situation requires. 'Doubling' is frequently used: a person gets behind the participant and says out loud what he thinks the protagonist is feeling. Improvisational theatre, a psychodrama variant, is unrelated to real-life situations; the improvised scene is often a pure flight of fancy that may be humorous and entertaining. (Groups are not always 'heavy' or serious. 'You don't have to express your feelings all the time,' says one group leader. 'If you can learn to enjoy yourself without being self-conscious about it, what more do you need?').

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The Gestalt approach, developed by Fritz Perls, emphasises a reintegration of attention and awareness. The Gestaltist therefore watches for 'evidence that focused organismic attention is developing outside of awareness'. This might take the form of a foot wriggling, a finger jabbing, or a hand tightening into a fist. The Gestalt approach to dreams assumes that all parts of the dream, animate and inanimate, are parts of the self. The dreamer tells his dream in the present tense and 'becomes' the different parts of his dream. A man who dreamed about an airport said, 'I have people constantly coming to me and leaving but none stay.' This turned out to be very significant for him. Gestalt also externalizes internal

conflicts, so that a man who wants to buy a new car but feel he shouldn't will alternately play his 'top-dog' (the domineering side of his personality) and his 'bottom-dog' (the dominated part of the self) until he arrives at some new insight or achieves a breakthrough.

Encounter has been strongly influenced by the work of Wilhelm Reich and of neo-Reichians like Alexander Lowen. The work of Ida Rolf ('structural integration' or Rolfing) has also had some influence, especially at Esalen. Rolfing is a muscular manipulation much deeper than ordinary massage, whereas Reichian bio-energetics works primarily with breathing and exercises designed to open or at least to loosen energy blocks. Lying on a mattress and kicking, vigorously hitting a big cushion with one's fists or with a tennis racket, and arching one's back over a kitchen stool are a few such exercises.

The encounter group must be seen in the context of the human potential movement of which it is a vital part. This movement, which includes mostly psychologists and psychologically sophisticated lay people, was a revolt against behaviorism on the one hand, orthodox psychoanalysis on the other, and reductionism in general. The underlying belief was that man had become one-dimensional and that he had not developed most of his human potential. The philosophical roots of the movement can be found in Kierkegaard, Buber, Tillich, S artre, Heidegger, as well as in Hindu and Buddhist thinking, especially Zen and the Tibetans.

To the outsider, and sometimes to the insider as well, it will appear that there is a great deal that is cultish and faddist in the encounter culture. They view the phenomenon as being artificial and somehow 'not real'. The encounter group is, certainly, artificial but it is its very artificiality that makes it so effective in coping with problems of alienation that our modern highly artificial life styles have created. In MacLuhan's terminology, it is the return to a global village. On a deeper level, it addresses itself to a spiritual hunger in man which, on a mass scale, is only now beginning to assert itself.



Dear SELF AND SOCIETY,

I am writing to this journal in the hope that the people who read it will recognize the absolutely tremendous value of what I've come to understand (and live) – and be willing to give me the help which I so desperately need to save my life. I know that I have come to understand myself, and other human beings, quite naturally, to the very bottom; and have found completely the total answers to the problems which I see all people suffering from, to one extent or another. It is not so complicated as most people seem to think – it is relatively simple things which people do to themselves which make them feel anywhere from vaguely dissatisfied with life to desperately unhappy, suicidal or in states of crippling depression. It is fairly simple what people are doing to cause their problems but it is a very big thing and somewhat frightening to stop doing those things which stifle one's being.

People are trying to disown themselves to one degree or another, because everyone's afraid if they are truly themselves – which means hearing and acting from, relating from, the deep river of Life and Reality flowing inside each one of us – people are afraid that they might end up *alone*. It is this fear of being alone in the world, not wanted, possibly rejected, that motivates people to give up bits and pieces of themselves (or great chunks of themselves), and it is this which is causing all the problems in the world today. I know we've all been taught that it's either necessary or even "natural" to be this way – there's the crazy idea that people wouldn't be able to get on together or live together if they didn't give up parts of themselves in order to. Also the idea that it's "selfish" to truly be oneself seems to have been implanted deeply in most of us. Living in a world where it's approved of to be half-alive and cut off from oneself, people are scared to take the step of really becoming themselves. There's always the fear that you'll end up alone, which I think controls people much more than they realize. And I know, from my own direct experience, that it needn't control people.

My own experience has been a *very* extreme one. I went to greater depths of insanity than I've ever seen in anyone else. I spent many years in mental hospitals and went through the most horrifying and terrible depressions. I finally realized fully after a time that I didn't stand a chance of surviving if I didn't really change – my agony was too great. So I plunged in completely and did the one thing I'd been too scared to do, and which would make a difference – break through to the actual life inside of me, and let it be. I went *all* the way with it to total honesty and reality. And related to others from this completely real place. Things felt completely right and I know this was the way life was meant to be. I allowed myself my yes's and my no's and I found huge wells of love inside me. And it worked to live this way – completely real. Contrary to my fears of rejection, I developed many strong friendships and love relationships. I certainly caused a few waves, and it took a lot of courage; but I had myself and no, I was not alone – for the first time in my life.

Because of the degree of insanity I went to, I am faced with an additional and extreme problem, which is described in the included poster. It is a matter of life and death to me to get the help I need. Not only would you be helping save my life – being in contact with someone who's real can cause tremendous growth and enriching of one's own life also. *Please* help me if you can.

Sincerely,

Sheila Davies