

Eric Hall

Dependency in Groups.

One of the commonly accepted aims of the activities associated with Humanistic Psychology, particularly group activities, is that they are trying to help the individual to cope with problems of dependency. This is helping the individual to free himself from the pressures and constraints of those around him and people from the past, particularly his parents. Riesman (1950) talks about 'other-directed' and 'inner-directed' types, which describes both of these forms of influence and uses the term 'autonomous' man for the person who is free of these influences. Maslow (1971) talks about the self-actualizing person and states it is necessary to stress spontaneity and autonomy to encourage the individual's own impulse towards growth and self-actualization. Similar concepts are Rogers (1961) 'fully functioning person' and Hampden Turner's (1970) 'radical man'.

On the surface, the various forms of group activity are working towards these ends and many of the structures within the group are specifically designed to cope with problems of dependency. The end product is often quite the opposite, in that individuals with limited experience and sometimes people who have been going to groups for many years, are looking for the leader who has the solution to all their problems. Techniques are offered and accepted as the final solution to neurosis, such as Primal Therapy, or a certain path to enlightenment, such as Arica Training. The successful leader is elevated to an almost god-like position and the group member submits himself passively to the 'treatment' with all the possible pitfalls of suggestion and 'group expectancy'.

First I am going to look at a type of situation in which the leader's charisma is enhanced in an extremely subtle way, even though he may continually emphasize the need for the individual to take responsibility for his own learning and may, himself, take a fairly passive role for most of the time. This is the situation in which there is a high level of direct confrontation in the group and the group is working on one of its members at a time. When the 'victim' is completely battered and confused, the group leader steps in with an escape from an extremely painful situation. With skilful timing and a store of techniques, a leader can take the majority of a group through this sort of experience. He is the person who will always have a solution when you are really desperate.

Justification for this approach came from an unusual source. Carlos Castaneda (1972) recounts Don Juan's advice on how a friend can cope with the disciplinary problems of his son. Don Juan suggests that he should hire a ferocious derelict to beat him every time he does something wrong. 'If one wants to stop our fellow men, one must always be outside the circle that presses them. That way one can always direct the pressure'. Personal experience and Don Juan suggest that this approach is an extremely powerful one, but it is important to be aware of the degree to which it is producing an increase in dependency.

The extreme form of confrontation group is the Synanon, which is obviously helping drug addicts and alcoholics to 'dry out'. In spite of the high level of aggressive confrontation,

the Synanon provides the Addict with a highly supportive community and in many cases dependency on drugs and alcohol is being replaced by dependency on the Synanon. This is obviously useful in a crisis situation, but more is required in pushing out to the further reaches of human potential.

The traditional Tavistock study group is a situation which is often criticized as one in which the counsellor acquires a god-like position because of the role he takes. This role usually involves sitting in silence, refusing to make any normal contact with members of the group other than making enigmatic comments about the processes, usually unconscious processes, that he feels are operating in the group. Although the position taken by the counsellor is extremely aloof, he is in fact putting all the responsibility for learning onto the group member. Bion (1961) in his limited writing puts great stress on the problem of dependency in groups and in the initial stages of a study group there tend to be a high incidence of interpretations involving dependency.

It seems to me that, in the study group the individual is brought face-to-face with the problem of dependency in the starkest possible way, and thus is directly the result of the role taken by the counsellor. This is so stark that many of the group members are unable to function for long periods of time. This partly explains the long periods of tense silence which take place in the study group. I feel suspicious of the critics who describe it as an extremely boring experience. It is a tough, hard situation and is unlikely to compete with the glamorous encounter group, but should be tried out at least once by the more serious devotees of personal growth, who realize the need for hard work and a certain amount of pain and suffering.

Perhaps a measure of the worth of the study group is the strange irrational

outbursts it produces from authoritarians, both from the right, such as most people who run institutions, and from the left (Humpty Dumpty No. 3).

Among other more conservative forms of group training the T-group, as it has emerged from N.T.L., seems to be fairly acceptable in institutions such as those in industry. Here the group leader plays a more facilitatory role. My experience of this sort of situation is that very subtle forms of dependency develop because the facilitator is trying to merge with the group, certainly to the extent that he will respond when spoken to. This defuses a great deal of the tension such as is obtained in the study group and opportunities for flight are introduced because the trainer is operating at a level of rational explanation, rather than trying to tap repressed processes in the group. Perhaps the T-group is acceptable to industry because it helps to oil the wheels rather than produce radical change.

The leaderless group is another way of coping with the problem of dependency. Carl Rogers (1970) suggests that leaderless groups can be therapeutic. On the other hand I have often heard suggestions that leaderless groups can be very destructive. It is interesting that these suggestions came from accepted group leaders and I am sure that destructiveness is not limited to the leaderless group. Part of individual responsibility is to be able to say 'No!' and even remove oneself from a toxic situation.

One or two leaderless sessions are often thrown in as part of ongoing led groups. This possibly produces another subtle form of unintended manipulation, in that the chaos and lack of direction in the leaderless group are compared with the productivity and structure of the led session. This naturally produces a favourable emotional response to the led session and can be a most devious way of fostering dependency.

Recently, we set up a leaderless group at Nottingham which seemed to be extremely productive. The group met for ten weeks on one evening a week in the university and there was a wide variety of experience in the group, including group counselling, gestalt, fantasy work, bio-energetics, massage and mind/body work. There were three elements in the group, which possibly explains its effectiveness.

1. The skills were shared and explained, which really demystified the individual who would be expected to use these skills. This rarely happens in the led groups where the leader may have a vested financial and personal interest in maintaining an air of mystery.
2. Members of the group who were less certain of what they were doing were encouraged to make suggestions whenever they felt these were suitable. There were suggestions of structure for the whole group. This produced a form of shared leadership, with everyone taking the lead at some point and accepted that everyone has something to contribute.
3. Members of the group were encouraged to reject suggestions when they were 'working', if they were certain these were not suitable. There are obvious dangers in this, in that there are bound to be resistances against 'doing the hardest thing.' This was often discussed and we formulated a distinction between a situation where the group member was confused and frightened and could not take up the suggestion and situations which just seemed to fall flat when they were suggested and evoked no emotional response in the recipient. Certainly the ultimate responsibility for work was placed on the group member.

In time, this produced a healthy disrespect for the accepted leaders in that it showed that their skills could be used effectively by the most naive members of the group, sometimes at the first attempt. Members of the group learned not to be too precious about with whom they worked and that the person making a suggestion was not infallible. People often suggest that they couldn't work with such and such a leader and there are possibly reasons for these feelings which could be looked into. In our group we tried to do this.

A further serious problem in relation to dependency is the business of making interpretations. Fritz Perls (1951) was quite emphatic in stating that any interpretation is bound to be wrong and it is the interpreter's trip which is being laid on the recipient. At best we can only be a mirror to the person we are trying to help. How often do you have a group leader begin a sentence 'My interpretation is. . . .' ? If pressed, he would probably say that it was just an intuition, but this is not how it is perceived by the more gullible group member. Perls insists that it is the therapist's job to give the patient the tools for interpretation; not to provide the interpretations.

Obviously there are situations in which dependency is a suitable, necessary and even important process. I certainly feel I have been brought up to be too independent for my own good. Perhaps this is why I feel the need to write about dependency and I am only working out my own hang ups. Many people who go for therapy are so debilitated that they have to begin from a position of extreme dependency. Personal growth, however, can only develop from self-learning and therefore a move away from dependency is essential. The group should not be allowed to become a prison in which the leader is consciously or unconsciously fostering dependency, making it a dead end for potential self-learning.

On the other hand, going it alone can be an extremely lonely and painful business, and even the I Ching seem to suggest that we should meet in groups to develop ourselves: -

'Knowledge should be a refreshing and vitalizing force. It becomes so only through stimulating intercourse with congenial friends with whom one holds discussion and practises application of the truths of life. In this way learning becomes many sided and takes on a cheerful lightness, whereas there is always something ponderous and one-sided about the learning of the self-taught.'

It would be easy to conclude with a statement that more research was needed in this area. As a social scientist, I would suggest that none has been done, in that the research, that I am aware of, always uses self-report questionnaires and objective ratings which destroy a variable in the attempt to quantify it. The 'research' has to be in a personal ongoing form, both for the group leader and for the group member

and perhaps to come to an understanding that these roles are not clearly separable is to begin the task of coping with dependency.

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Hans Lobstein

Another Way In

'I am a psychiatric social worker' she said, 'and I know all about my emotional problems. I only want you to work on my back, that is all, I don't want you to start dabbling in anything else. I am seven months pregnant, as you can see, and the pre-natal midwife tutor who knows your work thought that the pain in my back might be helped by massage.'

I nodded my head wisely. I should have known better than to assume that there must be some additional hidden reason for this pain. I am getting altogether too eager to make assumptions, just because it has happened before. One step at a time. Here is the pain, it may be in the back, the shoulders, the head or anywhere - but that is what they come for and that is enough.