
COMMUNITY COUNSELLING CIRCLES

by

John Southgate

As anyone who has experience of working in large groups will confirm, as the size of a group rises, the levels of trust, mutual support, caring and feelings of safety tend to diminish - just as with a small group of people in the street watching a person about to commit suicide by leaping from a tower block, the mood will tend to be full of solicitude, whilst with a large crowd the mood can change, with people saying things like 'get a move on if you're going to: jump'.

A new project that the Institute for Social Inventions is helping to promote consists of a new form of large group work, entitled 'community counselling circles', developed by the writer and colleagues. In one project recently, we have worked within the East Lincolnshire Area Health Authority to smooth the transition from very large mental hospitals to decentralised community units, using this new concentric circles group work to bring together for mutual support and training the sisters in the psychiatric wards and other personnel involved.

Rauceby Hospital near Sleaford last year was host to a group of senior community psychiatric sisters who

took part in a new course. Sometimes they could be seen walking in pairs around the grounds deep in conversation. Onlookers noticed something odd. Snatches of conversations overheard had a strange but engaging quality. There seemed to be ordinary chat, but it lacked logic and the conventions of everyday conversation. At other times a peep through a class room window produced another peculiar sight. In the middle sit four or five people on bean bags, in a circle. They lean on the knees of a group around them. Then another group around the second. And finally an outer group enclosing all the others. The onlooker cannot hear what they are saying but notices that the group look very intense and engaged. Sometimes there is one big circle with everyone animatedly talking, laughing and clearly enjoying something.

When members of the course were asked by colleagues what they were learning, it often seemed difficult to explain. Here is an imaginary conversation between two people (but based upon real experiences).

Enquirer: What's this course all about then?

Participant: Well, we learn about improving our counselling and helping skills but it's not a counselling course. . . er, we learn about creative work groups and new ways of organising but it's not an 'organisation course' . . . also we learn a lot about relationships and find that some of us are changing emotionally.

Enquirer: Is it a therapy group?

Participant: No, it's not . . . we learn a lot about fundamental issues like life and death, sanity and madness; but it's not a religious or philosophical course . . . we also get into issues like racism and sexism and politics sometimes but it's in no way a political course. Another effect is to build a group we can rely on for support and supervision and so protect ourselves a bit from 'burn-out' in these difficult times.

Enquirer: It sounds like a university course with masses of lectures.

Participant: No. There are no textbooks, no lectures.

Enquirer: Really? What on earth do your tutors do then?

Participant: They seem to have put together a most unlikely mixture of theories and practices - Freudian analysis, ecological theories, creative work cycle theory, even cybernetics and information theory. The main thing they do during sessions is to set up structures - pairs and circles.

Enquirer: What happens then?

Participant: There are two central processes. We free associate in pairs and groups. This is a sort of free-floating stream-of-consciousness dialogue. The tutors have taken this process from Freud's work. The other process is hard to describe and takes a long time to do well. They call this doing a 'Judo'. The aim of a Judo is to help a group or person-in-trouble to learn from their own experience and gain some enlightenment however small or modest in a particular instance. It is called 'Judo' because you try to 'fall-with' the person's direction and deflect them on to a new path - a Zen way of teaching and learning.

Enquirer: But how do you try to understand this mass of free associations?

Participant: They are concerned that we try to understand the many levels of experience in at least three dimensions. At its simplest, these three are, firstly, the organisational level or dimension; secondly, the familial; and thirdly the emotional or archetypal level.

Enquirer: And how does this work out in practice?

Participant: We sit in four concentric circles. We treat the innermost group as a single 'person'. The outer groups, we imagine as a helper, community worker, nurse or analyst. So the second concentric circle concentrates on picking up emotional data - through body sensations, images and archetypes. We call this circle E.T., the Emotional Thermometer. The third

circle concentrates on relationships that derive from the family - the familial level. We call this circle the Familial Thermometer. And finally the fourth and outer group concentrates on how the group-as-person organises life and work. This circle is the O.T., the Organisational Thermometer.

Enquirer: That sounds very complex and unwieldy.

Participant: Well, it is at first, but when you do it each week, sitting in a different circle, it seems quite easy. Eventually we use only two circles - inner and outer - when we've practised the different Thermometers - emotional, familial and organisational.

Enquirer: So what do you do with all this stuff - what's the pay-off?

Participant: We discuss the insights in terms of our work, our families, our feelings about big issues like cuts or re-organisation. Most important is that we report back to the group our own initiatives in the world outside.

Enquirer: How does that happen?

Participant: In two ways. Firstly, we always end with a general discussion in a big circle. And secondly, we always start with what we call 'Trauma, Trivias and Joys' of the week. Each person tells us a bit

of their lives - such as 'the dog chewed matches and set fire to my house' or whatever. It's like an on-going soap opera but with ourselves as the subjects. You wouldn't believe the things that happen to people.

Enquirer: Do you deal with big work issues, like the re-organisation of the NHS?

Participant: We have worked on that - not only organisationally but at the familial and emotional levels as well. We find it helpful to use the tutors' group's ideas about mature and immature Human Eco-systems which they seem to have drawn from an obscure ecologist named Margalef, and a Buddhist researcher Ken Wilber.

Enquirer: It all sounds too good to be true to me. Don't things go wrong?

Participant: Sure. Any new social innovation has to make mistakes and go through crises. This one is still in its infancy and attempts to do in one course things that are ordinarily done in a whole number of separate courses. One crucial matter is that tutors and members need to be able to hold and contain some heavy emotions like fear of death, depression, loss, madness and so on. Although I don't want to give the impression that it's all heavy weather. In fact I've never laughed so much on a course in all my life.

John Southgate and his colleagues have developed these community counselling circles through work in a number of different settings. Apart from the East Lincolnshire Area Health Authority, they have worked with:

a Community Groups course in Lambeth, the Lonaon Borough of Islington decentralisation programme, an I.T. project 'Link' in Hackney, the British Association of Settlements and Social Action Centres; and work is planned to begin shortly with workers at an Asian Women's Refuge.

Southgate's book about this method - 'Community Counselling Circles, a New Social Invention', subtitled 'A Book of Working Notes, Cartoons and Diagrams for Teachers of the Method' - is available from the Institute for Social Inventions, 24 Abercorn Place, London NW8 9XP - Price £8.95 (libraries and institutions), £5.95 (postage included) for Self and Society readers.

Books referred to on John Rowan's article on Page 45

- Chicago, Judy (1979) **The dinner party** Garden City: Anchor Books.
- Daly, Mary (1979) **Gyn/Ecology** Boston: Beacon Press.
- Dumayevskaya, Raya (1981) **Rosa Luxembour, women's liberation and Marx's philosophy of revolution** Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Dworkin, Andrea (1974) **Woman hating** New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Fasteau, Marc Feigen (1975) **The male machine** New York: Dell.
- Gray, Elizabeth Dodson (1982) **Patriarchy as a conceptual trap** Wellesley, Mass.: Roundtable Press.
- Groth, A.N. (1979) **Men who rape: The psychology of the offender** New York: Plenum Press.
- Hite, Shere (1976) **The Hite report on female sexuality** London: Talmy Franklin.
- Hite, Shere (1981) **The Hite report on male sexuality** London: Macdonald.
- Kokopeli, Bruce & Lakey, George (1982) 'Masculinity and violence' **Peace News** 20 May 1977. Reprinted in Pam McAllister (ed) **Reweaving the web of life: Feminism and nonviolence** Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Lederer, Laura (ed) (1980) **Take back the night: Women on pornography** New York: William Morrow.
- Lindsay, Karen (1979) 'Compassion, altruism and man hating' in E. & B.M. Shapiro (eds) **The women say: The men say** New York: Dell.
- McAllister, Pam (ed) (1982) **Reweaving the web of life: Feminism and nonviolence** Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Miller, Jean Baker (ed) (1973) **Psychoanalysis and women** Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Morgan, Robin (ed) (1970) **Sisterhood is powerful** New York: Vintage Books.
- Negrin, Su (1972) **Begin at start** Washington: Times Change Press.
- Oakley, Ann (1974) **Housewife** London: Alen Lane.
- Reynaud, Emmanuel (1983) **Holy virility** London: Pluto Press.
- Rhodes, D. & McNeill, S. (eds) (1985) **Women against violence against women** London: Onlywomen Press.
- Seidler, Vic (1985) 'Fear and intimacy' in A. Metcalf & M. Humphries (eds) **The sexuality of men** London: Pluto Press.
- Snodgrass, Jon (ed) (1977) **A book of readings for men against sexism** New York: Times Change Press.
- Swain, Nina & Koen, Susan (1980) **A handbook for women on the nuclear mentality** Norwich, Vt.: Women Against Nuclear Destruction.
- Warnock, Donna (1982) 'Patriarchy is a killer: What people concerned about peace and justice should know' in Pam McAllister (ed) **Reweaving the web of life** Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Wright, Betsy (1982) 'Sunpower/Moonpower/Transformation' in Pam McAllister (ed) **Reweaving the web of life** Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
-