The Same Some Time Later

Gaie Houston

I have been asked to recall what I can of the evolution of work with groups over the last quarter century. Evolution is a funny business. My God, did we really wear trousers that looked like that? Heavens, did we live whole episodes of group life without addressing the transference by name and title, or acknowledging the unconscious, or observing other, at times plonky, rituals of some present small group work? So what was going on around that time, within my awareness?

Encounter groups are the first to come to mind. Carl Rogers was one of many who used the title to describe small group events, geared toward what came to be called Personal Growth. These originated from his client-centred ethos of supportive psychotherapy in the 1940s, and came by degrees to express his dream of a global village, a world linked by creative and aware small groups.

Along the west coast of America there grew up in the 1950s, and travelled occasionally to this country, a diversity of vaguely similar events, often devoid of aware political aspiration. These sometimes involved dance, wandering around the countryside, all manner of set group exercises, sleep deprivation, even nudity and sexual experimentation, all in the cause of heightened personal consciousness.

The high was a feature of those small group experiences. I was reminded of it in Oxford the other day when an academically gifted undergraduate told me about a one-term counselling course, from whose final weekend he had just emerged, awed, emotional and saying that it had been the most important piece of learning he had experienced since he arrived in the University. See title. My guess is that the *satori* experience, the mini-enlightenment that can come about in many process-oriented small groups, continues to awaken people and leave them with the excitement and sense of potential that fired so many of us in the early seventies. It just happens now in groups of trainees rather than groups of strangely-clad seekers of Personal Development, one of the phrases current at that time. Then it was Maslowian, self-actualising, where now it is probably focused nearer professional development.

In management training in this country in the late sixties and early seventies, the American National Training Laboratories, on their T-group and inter-group programmes, represented a major influence. NTL T-groups were conducted by gifted and highly trained professionals, who used that art which conceals art in leading small groups which encouraged openness. The model of mind that could be inferred assumed a tendency to creativity,

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co-operation and love among the members. Inter-group experiments happened alongside the small groups, so group and organisational awareness was raised in line with personal insight.

I would like to go back a few more decades for a moment, to the origin of the T-group method of group training which remains a strong influence in many kinds of group work today. T-groups, a shorthand for training groups, began in the thirties. Leland Bradford and Kurt Lewin took part in an experimental event which consisted of discussions between black and white Americans, with the hope of gaining some insight into how to work towards racial harmony. These content-focused discussions were turned, inspirationally, into what we would now call process groups. The behaviour of the group became its subject of study. The process comment was shared by everyone, and the emotional bases of all that had been disguised in debate and discussion was brought out, attended to, and allowed to change people's perception. That process focus is central to several evolutionary lines of small group in the third quarter of this century.

By the very end of the sixties, T-groups were fashionably avant-garde, so that even Presidents of large US and UK corporations could be beguiled into them. Sceptical trainers sometimes suggested that for such people the T-group week was an annual bath, a high to be left where it happened, rather than taken away to change the process of the workplace back home. Changing economics and society have made T-group training rare nowadays, but before discussing this aspect I would first like to trace other changes and more history.

When I was finally back from the States in the early 1970s I wrote sixty thousand words, putting down on paper the new vision I had of politics, government, education, literature, psychology, economics. A friend who is a poet said, 'These words shine like silver.' His wife said, 'Yes, but it won't fit any publisher's list.' This was one of the dilemmas following on from such a form of education. Those who went through it might have a strong sense of enlightenment. But we just did not fit any publisher's list. So it was that the Alternative Culture grew up, unawarely fostering its own destruction insofar as it would not bridge in some way to the rest of society.

The free experimentation happening in growth groups in the USA and UK affected much organisational training at this time. T-groups, enlightening among strangers, were sometimes brought in as departmental events, with dire sequelae. More successfully, there were as I remember all manner of process demonstrations which enthused people at that time. Managers were required to get to know, not just to describe, but really to know, one lemon out of a basketful. Thence they might be sent out for an afternoon to get to know a wino, in many cases with discernible and beneficent change in their back-home manners resulting. Yet it would be easy to snigger a little now at the memory of such experiments.

Then there was the State Simulation, where one of the consultants was imprisoned in a phone booth for eight hours in an excess of verisimilitude. There was the Power Lab in which a boss, demoted for the day to being floor-sweeper and treated accordingly, grew so enraged that he stuck a fork in a waiter's hand in a demand for improved service. How this behaviour was

interpreted in the outcome study I am not clear.

Group training methods at this time were occasionally disastrous or ill-conceived, as is likely when there is a great spirit of experimentation. But I look back at the rattling of hierarchies and preconceptions in which a few of us were engaged with some satisfaction. I was involved in a remarkably egalitarian piece of group-dominated human relations training led by John Southgate and other gifted and highly idiosyncratic people. This appealed to me far more than what I experienced as the often more esoteric and unrelated weekend groups at Quaesitor, the London emporium at that time of varied group work events.

When I was in Maine a trainer had taken me aside to tell me of a wonderful piece of training available in the UK. He meant the Tavistock Leicester Experience, which continues to this day, and seems by report to be as conducive to revolution in one's belief systems as it was in his or mine. The Leicester Experience deals with small group, inter-group, institutional and large group experience and emphasises the unconscious sexual and hostile material in all interaction. When I was there, no time was spent on commenting on the collaborative and creative aspects of our behaviour. The model of mind appeared to be that of the dragon in the cupboard.

These schools of thought on either side of the Atlantic might seem mutually exclusive. They had in common excellent theoretical underpinning, excellence of method and skill. And they both focused on an aspect of human behaviour and motivation generally glossed over or perceived dimly. To my mind, one without the other is insufficient. The difficulty has been the human need for false clarity, for a belief system without chinks of darkness. So the humanists have sometimes sneered at everybody who did not believe in their model, and the analytic and psychodynamic schools chiyiked at what they see as the feeble theoretical foundations of the humanist beliefs. Belief is the problem. Models of mind are founded on belief, so give space for orthodoxy, heresy and others of the less desirable aspects of religious systems.

Back in the sixties I had been concerned with ward-groups, a daringly egalitarian innovation at that time, in a vast psychiatric hospital. The spirit of those times was inclined to experiment and rattling at established practice. In 1969 and 1970 in the north-east of England, I had seen and worked with staff from Durham Business School in community group work interventions. From all this I had developed a taste for group training which had wider immediate social application than the self-actualisation to be found at many weekend events at that time. Some of my work in the mid-seventies is an illustration of how groups were being popularised or utilised, so that Society could be put alongside Self in the title of this journal. That is a way of summing up the ambition I had in working with groups, and which was expressed by a number of others too. That there should be a European Groupwork Symposium in London every summer now is partly a testament to our beliefs.

For the Home Office, a colleague and I did group-level interventions in a non-custodial experiment for violent offenders. We ran groups for the cons, as they liked to call themselves, a supervision group for their probation officers, and a full community group it still gives me the

heebie-jeebies to remember parts of. On television a young psychiatrist and I ran an eleven-session small non-therapy process group. (The members were drawn from an Ealing gardening club.) The large mailbag we received made it clear that many viewers had used the series to give them courage to go to recommended therapy groups they had been avoiding.

In a youth club I dramaturged a play devised and acted by the members about their common experience of schooling; it won them a prize, and is still in production somewhere in the world every year. In a day-hospital I ran groups with a mixed population of schizophrenic and advanced neurotic patients. Then I worked on a counselling course, helping bring in the egalitarian design which was still in place when I visited the course eighteen months ago. With a colleague I set up a small consultancy, the basis of which was that clients negotiated their training needs with us, rather than letting us prescribe for them, as was common practice at that time. Today it would be seen as intrusive in many settings to impose on group members, rather than elicit their needs and hopes before making a design. And there are indeed many settings. Tenants' groups, carers' groups, groups of patients, groups for those who look after them, parents' groups, toddlers' groups, ex-offenders' groups and many more besides have all come into being since the seventies.

The 1970s was a decade of group experiment in so many spheres. There was a theory of change in all this work, to do with raising awareness, at intrapsychic, interpersonal, group, inter-group, organisational, social and cultural levels. The method was largely NTL. By this I mean that the ideal was to be phenomenological, appropriately disclosing, respectful, aware, with role-clarity combined with humility. Below this NTL method was a strong awareness of the two models of mind, or rather, the two polarities emphasised in the different schools I have described here. The synthesis or integration of what can be expressed extremely as people-are-baddies versus people-are-misunderstood-goodies is or should be part of the work of group-trainers now. Among the punters, there is impatience with the untouchable distance of many analytic group consultants. There is scepticism about the woolliness of some Rogerian person-centred chummy group leaders. (Carl Rogers' first words at a large group experience I attended were, 'I would like you to understand that I am not a Rogerian.')

The integration is now happening. Bion has been installed in many a humanistic group. The dialogue, *à la* Buber, may be seen as a method in analytic, cognitive and humanistic small groups. Some analytic groups use psychodrama and other Moreno inventions. Some humanists now admit that they interpret or invite group-level interpretation of group behaviour in terms once inimical to those stout defenders of the notion of self-responsibility. It is acceptable in management training to teach group-level interpretation of events that might once have been seen as only individual. Field theory and systems theory, as well as listening skills, sit side by side in much organisational training.

Importantly, integrative psychotherapy has been named and become a coherent movement in a way likely to give clarity and authority to many a homespun integrator. Hitherto we were at risk of be-

ing crushed between the two mighty grindstones of the schools we sought to bring together.

The enormous growth of counselling training has greatly affected one strand of group work. People turned up in former times to encounter, to develop sensitivity, or to expand awareness just for the hell of it. Now many of them sit in small groups with one eye on their souls and the other peering up the chimney of the mechanics of running the event. The good news of this taming of personal development via groups is that it has alerted people to the need for competence rather than just vibrant charisma in the leaders. The bad news, in part, is the deadening effect of institutionalising what was once revolutionary, off-beat and pioneering.

There is another school of group work which has in the opinion of many become the mainstream over the last fifteen years. This is cognitively-based, strictly time-bounded, and more programmatic work. It is widely used in the social services and the probation service. Arguably, it puts more emphasis on the group as the occasion of learning than as the instrument of learning. But any critique of any group methods needs to be in the light on the one hand of the intentions for and within the group; on the other of the outcomes. Context too has great significance.

Our context, the end of this century, feels to me wary. Economically we are at least once bitten and twice shy; unemployment is a spectre or reality for unskilled and for highly qualified people alike. Socially we are in a new barbarism of beggars shivering in streets which are also frequented by an ever more affluent minority. The lottery has infected the national imagination with dreams of the ultimate individualism of beating everyone, being the one chosen super-millionaire. Litigation is taking off as a national sport of one-against-the-others. There is a cultural shove back towards the everyone-for-himself individualism so enthusiastically described by political leaders in the eighties who have done, in some cases suspiciously, well for themselves. Greed is a motif nowadays in a way that it was not twenty years ago. Professionalisation has good uses, but its bad ones include exclusivity, which involves greed again.

Professionalisation is another motif of the nineties. This has much to do with the Treaty of Rome. So it is that the Department of Employment has some of us sitting boggled in a committee room at the moment, inventing measurements of group work suitable for National Vocational Qualification in the topic. There are those who argue that group work skills cannot be nailed down without dying in the process. I can accept that doing is being, and that behavioural descriptors can be made of the shrewd and saintly qualities involved in leading or catalysing all manner of groups. I want group practitioners to be able to account for themselves coherently, to be answerable for what they do, and to have a background of theory and research.

In the training institution where I work, I believe that we turn out graduates whose skills in working with small groups are far more thorough and informed than mine were when I was first let loose on the paying public. I remind myself how many groups now exist where they never did before, for so many kinds of people. Then there are the occasional hugely imaginative innovations such as Corporate Theatre, which involves people in diagnosing, enacting and then processing the

perceived problems of their working environment. So things are in some respects looking up.

And there is a long way further to look still. I come across a dilution of group methods in many institutions. Staff support groups degenerate into gripe groups which seem to foster venom rather than understanding and charity. Obligatory Personal Groups for counselling students sometimes have the air of bored tea-parties. In the rock-climbing and other outdoor activities which have become part of some management training, the task itself seems often to be all that is overtly attended to, with a covert obeisance to 'blokey' values, rather than the applicability of peer-dependence, trust and so forth to the workplace. And money is not spent on this form of training as much as before. A long time ago E.M. Forster suggested that enlightened liberal values could only live alongside economic independence. If that is so, then we have a long time to wait until it is comfortable for many people to look at the group implications of their personal behaviour in more than the tiniest context.

But I have a sneaky hope that more purse-holders will notice that it is cheaper to work with a group than with an individual. It is easier in some ways, and far harder in others. But it is cheaper. So greed and selfishness might yet have a paradoxical outcome, and lead to more resources going into thorough training for people to work with all manner of groups in all manners of settings.

T-Groups: The Tavistock Leicester Experience

David Wasdell

Memories are made of this! Digby Hall in the University of Leicester, home to the annual Tavistock Leicester Conference, was the chosen venue for the combined AHP and AHPP Conference in the spring of 1996. Driving in through the main gates to park under the ancient yew trees opened the doors to a flood of recollections spanning a quarter of a century. The dining hall was new, but all the rest was familiar and the present reality of the AHP was overlaid on a dynamic tapestry of memory. It was incongruous to find that the panelled home of plenary sessions and countless large-group events had been deconsecrated for use as the bar-lounge. Other rooms refreshed recall of small-group sessions, of inter-group and in-

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