



Drama, as well as training or therapy, may be employed as a useful research and practice paradigm in working with small groups. In this context, groups may represent a form of "collective art" in Fromm's sense, and stages or forms of idiosyncratic group processes may parallel the unfolding of dramatic performances. The implications of this view for group development as a whole, and for member and leader participation, are explored.

GROUP PROCESS AS DRAMA

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Over the last thirty years, the growth of the encounter group movement has meant that many thousands of people have participated in intensive small group experiences. The historical origins of the small group method as a concern and technique of social scientists (see Back, 1972) has led the disciplines of psychology and sociology to provide the dominant conceptual frameworks. In particular, two models imported from the social sciences have been widely applied to groups: training and therapy. Groups are seen as forms of training in human relations skills leading to improved interpersonal competence, or they are understood as a form of therapy for people without serious emotional or behavioral problems, contributing to the personal growth and increased happiness of participants.

Strong models or metaphors such as these typically guide scientific research programs (Hesse, 1966; Turbayne, 1970). Many important studies on the effects of group experience, the role of the leader and the processes that facilitate personal change, have been carried out within these paradigms. Nevertheless, among both practitioners and researchers,



there appears to be an emerging sense of dissatisfaction with these traditional models of the group experience (Mann, 1966; Bednar and Kaul, 1979), and various alternative conceptualizations have been offered.

Alternative Culture

The structure of one important alternative model is stated, implicitly or explicitly, in the work of a number of writers. The core of this competing metaphor is the view that the experiential group represents the prototype for an alternative culture. Encounter groups are seen as "a model of social interaction that is applicable to the whole society and to the whole of human life" (Back, 1979: 292), and as "a necessary part of the process of building a better order" (Shepard, 1970: 260). The group is the repository of a set of humanistic values and is a means of promoting these values (Blumensteil, 1973; Cooper-Levine, 1978). Yet, however compelling this view may be, it is clear that participation in an encounter group can only be one of the many activities that might constitute an alternative culture. Each culture will have its own art, language, literature, mode of dress and conduct, pastimes, social structure, and set of economic relationships. If groups are associated with a special or alternative culture, they can only comprise one fragment of a wider cultural pattern, and the questions remain as to the type of contribution the experiential group makes to the whole.

Collective Art

One way of looking at groups in the context of culture and society is suggested by Fromm's (1956) notion of "collective art." Fromm notes that throughout history people have participated in communal events (religious rituals, dance, passion plays, Greek drama) in which "fundamental problems of human existence were presented in an artistic and dramatic form" (Fromm, 1956: 145). In contemporary



society, however, Fromm sees a virtual withering away of meaningful ritual and collective art, and he calls for the revival or restoration of such activities as a necessary part of the process of building a “sane society.” Although he does not mention encounter or other types of experiential groups, they do, in fact, fulfill his criteria for effective forms of collective art. Such groups are certainly places where people come together, outside the routine of everyday life, to participate in emotionally involving interactions in which existential value orientations are illustrated by means of dramatic interplay. They may be seen as an example of a new form of meaningful ritual or collective art that has developed in modern industrial, or postindustrial, society.

Within this perspective, participation in a group serves to reorient the person with respect to what Fromm (1956: 145) calls “the roots of his existence,” but it does so in a particular way. The process of the group, the means by which a set of strangers come to acknowledge and celebrate a collective identity and shared sense of purpose and feeling, can be recognized as a form of contemporary drama. As members of a group explore their perceptions of each other and become known to each other, so do the characters in a drama develop substance as the plot unfolds. The group setting may likewise be experienced as a stage for dramatic incidents; the group leader may function as a director; members of the group may adopt central, heroic roles, or be content to take a supporting part. These and other similarities between groups and drama are more systematically explored in the following sections, where some of the results of small group research are reinterpreted from a dramatic point of view.

DRAMA AND THE STAGES OF GROUP PROCESS

Many researchers of the intensive small group have suggested that there exists a series of identifiable stages through which a group will typically pass during its lifetime. Group members can be observed to exhibit qualitatively



different behaviors, interaction patterns, levels of expressed feeling, and themes of discussion at each of the stages. Perhaps the most well-known model of group development is presented by Tuckman (1965), who postulates four main phases or stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing. In the first stage, members of the group establish boundaries, introduce themselves to each other, and generally orient themselves to the task. Following this, in a clearly defined second stage, members' emotional responses to the task demands result in polarization and conflict. Then, in a third phase, group members share their perceptions of what is happening and work out a tacitly agreed-upon mode of operation, or set of norms. Finally, there is a fourth stage, in which the group settles down to resolve the tasks with which it is confronted.

In a more recent formulation, Tuckman and Jensen (1977) propose a fifth adjourning stage, where the group deals with issues relating to termination. Tuckman's model appears to be consistent, at a general level, with a range of theories of group development produced by researchers and practitioners using different methods and traditions (Braaten, 1974/1975; Caple, 1978).

In broad terms, the stages of group development outlined by Tuckman and others have striking parallels to the way theatre or cinema action is structured. In conversational drama, at least, it is customary for there to be an opening scene during which characters are introduced and the main themes of the piece are articulated. This introductory scene, or scenes, is followed by the exposition of plot and subplot, featuring a fuller elaboration of the dynamics of key characters. The growing tension and suspense generated by the exposition culminates in a turning point or climax, which then leads to a quieter resolution of the opening themes (Brockett, 1969; Esslin, 1976).

Although this model of the structure of dramatic productions represents one version of some of the more orthodox forms of drama, it is nevertheless useful in pointing out

important similarities between the stages in group process and those found in the unfolding of a plot. Both groups and dramas have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Both begin with information or speculation about the identities, intentions, and motivations of the characters, and about what might happen. Both, then, move into a stage of exploration of feelings and relationships, often involving a degree of conflict. Both end with a period during which issues are cleared up, business is completed, changes in behavior or attitudes are witnessed or reported, and the outside world is reengaged.

Roles

The idea that members of small groups may adopt specific roles has a long tradition. For example, in studies of interaction patterns between members of laboratory groups, Bales and his co-workers found that leadership functions would typically become differentiated between a task leader, who directed members to consider practical issues, and a socioemotional leader, who focused attention on affective and relationship issues (Slater, 1955). Later generations of group researchers have identified more complex sets of role relationships in long-term therapy or self-analytic groups. Dunphy (1968), using a more sophisticated version of Bales' methods in an investigation of self-analytic groups, reported five distinct member roles: instructor, aggressor, scapegoat, seducer, and idol. Similarly, Beck (1974), in a study of therapy groups, noted four salient role positions: designated leader, emotional leader, scapegoat and defiant member.

These studies and others clearly demonstrate the existence of special roles or positions within the structure of an intensive small group. People who come to fill these positions are seen by other members as possessing special qualities and engage in distinctively different behaviors. Various theorists have postulated that the development of



the group crucially depends on these individuals. As Dunphy (1968: 214) puts it, "role specialists function as important symbols of alternative responses to the focal qualities of each major stage in group development." It is as if, in groups as in drama, the "emotional field" (Bion, 1961) achieves its greatest intensity around a few principal characters: heroes, heroines, and villains whose interactions dramatically express the moral questions that lie behind the plot.

This perspective suggests another type of role within the group—that of the audience. Although some group members may be at the center of the stage for much of the life of the group, others will function in supporting roles or as the audience, attending to the action, reflecting and heightening emotional reactions, communicating approval or disapproval, or just watching. In an ingenious study, McLeish (1973) compared the effects of actually participating in a self-analytic group with those from merely observing the same group through a one-way mirror. The participants in this study who were observers turned out to report as much learning as did the actual group members. Studies of members' perceptions of significant learning experiences in groups also show that people frequently learn in groups by watching others and by being part of the audience (Lieberman et al., 1973).

The Group Leader

It can be seen that the script, which in the case of a play is written in advance by the playwright, is provided in the group by the members themselves. Each group member can be seen to possess a personal script (Steiner, 1974) or role-theme (Oatley, 1980) which is likely to frame the way he or she reacts to the events of the group or initiates action in the group. The individual's script or role-theme comprises a set of heavily over-learned defensive strategies for interacting with others, and in the unstructured and often threatening



setting of the group the person will often use these strategies.

One of the most powerful elements of group work is that the group may come to be a place where a person can become aware of his or her self-defeating interaction strategies. It is in this context that the role of the group leader is important. Most experiential or learning groups contain at least one person in the role of leader or facilitator. This role is a complex and even paradoxical one, comprising a quality of direction or ultimate guardianship while maintaining that members take responsibility for themselves. Although, the role of the leader is understood, it clearly does not involve devising the plot, inventing the characters, and writing the script, but tends to contribute to the articulation of expression of plot, script, and characterization. Thomas (1969: 76) compares the skill of facilitating groups to that of being “a type of psychological midwife who aids and abets that which is about to be born.” In this respect, the group leader functions in a similar manner to the theater or film director, working with language, movement, timing, props, and scenery to “aid and abet” the effective articulation of script. The skills of the therapist or group leader can be seen as very similar to those of the theater director as summed up by Brook when he writes that “the director is always an imposter, a guide at night who does not know the territory, and yet he has no choice—he must guide, learning the route as he goes” (quoted in Pedder, 1979: 379).

Self-Disclosure and Experiencing Emotion

Many studies have shown that self-disclosure and expressing feelings and emotions are two processes central to successful experiential group outcomes (Hill, 1975; Blumberg and Golombiewski, 1976). These processes are also central to drama. Brockett (1969) suggests that the middle part of most plays consists of a series of complications. Each complication can be seen as an unresolved question or conflict which is



opened by the disclosure of a piece of information by one of the characters. This disclosure may be to another character or group of characters, or to the audience alone. The overall effect of complications is to build up the interest, tensions, and suspense experienced by the audience. The eventual resolution of the episode is typically marked by another disclosure which leads to a greater awareness of the aspects of the identities of protagonists' identities: "The substance of most complications is discovery . . . self-discovery is usually the most powerful" (Brockett, 1969: 32).

So the cumulative effect of overlapping series of complications or episodes is to create a heightened emotional intensity coupled with personal revelation and deeper insight into the personalities of the people involved. This is just what happens in groups. The flow of action in experiential groups can be viewed as a series of episodes punctuated by discoveries of various kinds, such as the disclosure of a painful personal secret, the playing out of an interaction between two group members, or the intervention of the group leader. The episodic nature of group life has been recognized from the earliest attempts at research on groups (Hobbs, 1951).

The skill of the dramatist, Scheff (1979) argues, is to create in the audience a state in which they are neither too closely identified with, nor too distant from, their own emotional experience. Scheff suggests that when individuals are both participating in and observing their own emotions, it becomes possible for them to go through a process of catharsis by which previously repressed emotional experiences such as grief or anger can be expressed and lived through. In studies of audience participation in drama, Scheff (1979) has demonstrated that drama which has the deepest impact on an audience is that which maintains this balance between feeling and cognition, or, in his terms, maintains an "aesthetic distance." Similarly, research on groups has shown that it is not the expression of emotion, per se, which is beneficial for participants, but the expression of



emotion within a framework of understanding (Lieberman et al., 1973).

The Framing Effect of the Group

Drama may be defined as action that is staged or framed. The stage in the theater or the screen in the cinema becomes a single focal point for the attention of the audience, and consequently the events which take place there gain special significance. Esslin (1976: 51-52) gives an anecdotal account of the power of the stage as a framing device:

Max Frisch describes in his diaries how when he was first asked to come to the Zurich theatre to be commissioned to write his first play, he arrived too early and sat waiting in the empty, dark auditorium. Suddenly the lights on the stage went up, a stagehand appeared and placed some chairs in readiness for the rehearsal that was about to start. Frisch describes how he watched this activity with rapt attention, how suddenly every movement of the man acquired tremendous significance, simply because it was happening on a lit stage, for we are conditioned to think of a stage (or a television or cinema screen) as spaces within which significant things are being shown; they therefore concentrate our attention and compel us to try and arrange everything that happens there into a significant pattern, to make sense of it as a pattern.

Groups also take place within a space where events are given special attention, where members “try and arrange everything that happens . . . into a significant pattern.” Turner (1972), in a study of group talk, found that the way members of a therapy group talked to each other changed markedly once the group leader had entered the room and the group had started. From having previously engaged in dyadic conversations, the group turned to focusing on the talk of one member at a time. This person’s utterances, particularly lapses, hesitations, or irrelevancies, would be subjected to the closest examination.

In another study, McCardel and Murray (1974) compared the impact of different styles of encounter group leadership. In one of their control groups, participants were taken to a



conference center expecting to take part in encounter activities, but were instead invited to spend time ballroom dancing and playing games such as charades or volleyball. The researchers instructed the leader of this group, a former dance teacher with no encounter experience, to avoid all meaningful or therapeutically oriented discussion. Yet when behavioral and self-report outcomes measures were taken of the effects of the different styles of group experience, the members of this "recreation" group were found to have shared the general benefits reported by those who took part in the actual encounter groups, and to have recorded even more gains in the areas of reduced dogmatism and defensiveness. Thus, it seems that the very fact of being in a group, participating in a framed interaction with others, and being set apart from the reality of everyday life can have a powerful effect on people, even when the content of that interaction consists of ballroom dancing lessons and volleyball.

CONCLUSIONS

The examples discussed above demonstrate that experiential groups are similar to drama in several important ways. The process of the group, the roles taken by group members, the function of the leader, the centrality of self-revelation and feeling, and the framing effect of the group all point toward the appropriateness of the drama analogy. However, although the drama metaphor may be a fitting one, it is nevertheless necessary to ask whether it is also useful and whether it can make any significant contributions to group practice and research.

One aspect of practical group work to which the drama perspective can be immediately compared is in the area of group process. Some studies have suggested that although various models of phases in the life of a group may offer a valid conceptualization of group process in general, individual groups may take quite idiosyncratic paths through the



different stages (Lundgren and Knight, 1978). From the point of view of classic group development theory, these results are anomalous. From the perspective of the group as drama, however, they are to be expected because, although most plays, films, and other dramatic productions may conform to the “beginning, middle and end” model (Brockett, 1969), this sequence is not a necessary feature of drama as such. There are many successful dramas that disregard the conventional sequencing of action, Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* being one well-known example. The dramatic tension and interest in this play are maintained by a series of questions that do not seem to lead toward any progression or climax. Nevertheless, *Waiting for Godot* is a play which, more powerfully than most, leaves an impact on its audience.

The message for group practitioners may be, then, that arrival at a state of closeness and performance may not be necessary for effective groupwork. Certain groups struggling with particular issues may more authentically spend their time in an absurdist mode of operation (see Ward, 1974). Indeed, there is evidence to support the notion that participants may even learn more in unfinished groups than in those in which a state of harmony and intimacy ultimately pervades.

A second implication of the drama perspective concerns the type of learning that takes place in groups. Writers often emphasize cases in which individuals have undergone profound and far-reaching transformations as a result of the group experience (Rogers, 1969). At the same time, researchers typically report that only a small proportion of participants make gains of this magnitude (Lieberman et al., 1973) and that most participants report minor and often temporary improvements in self-acceptance, empathy, and so forth (Smith, 1975). These seemingly contradictory results are consistent with the dramatic model which predicts that, in any group, only the few members who take central roles are likely to experience any fundamental reappraisal of themselves and their lives. Other participants,



such as those in the roles of supporting cast and audience, are likely either to become more empathic, be better able to listen, become more accurate in perceiving others, assimilating the values and lore of the group's movement, or to remain basically unchanged apart from receiving affirmation of their worth through time spent in close interaction with other people. Members who do not take on central roles in the group may be said to engage in psychological education, rather than self-transformation.

The conditions under which members take on one type of role rather than another in a group is a researchable question which requires future study. One possibility is that the person's position in relation to important life events or transitions (Adams et al., 1976) may be a crucial factor. This question also has relevance for group composition. If all the members of a group are ready for change (for example, in a crisis center), there may not be enough time to let them each take a central role. Conversely, if none of the members are ready (for example, in a long-stay psychiatric ward), the group may not generate enough dramatic complications to produce the learning that its more passive members are potentially capable of.

Finally, the proposition that groups are like drama has implications for the training of group leaders, facilitators, and therapists. Training techniques used in dramatic education may be borrowed, and the critical literature may be consulted. Greater familiarity with the themes found in classic drama and art may extend the awareness of novice leaders in useful directions.

In this article it has been argued that viewing groups as a form of drama is consistent with the research evidence and is a useful perspective for practical purposes. It remains to be understood just how different types of groups employ elements of drama. Relatively unstructured group settings such as basic encounter groups, Tavistock, and self-analytic groups allow for the development of dramas that may involve all members over long periods of time. Other styles of groupwork such as Gestalt or psychodrama construct



clearly defined episodes in which a drama is built around one person. Other types of groups such as Alcoholic Anonymous or other self-help networks may use very ritualistic forms of dramatic expression. These and many other questions about groups remain unanswered. It will be enough if, in Mann's (1966: 36) words, the dramatic analogy contributes to our "sense of what can happen in groups . . . our mutual and growing appreciation of the possible."

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