

Multiple Relationships, Hierarchies and Power in Person-Centered Encounter Groups

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Person-Centered encounter groups are as ubiquitous in the Client-Centered community as Rogers himself. During 1946 and 1947, Rogers and his colleagues created a training course for graduate students on how to be effective counselors for the returning GIs of post-World War II. Differing from other more cognitive approaches, Rogers and his associates' program for educating counselors who treated returning veterans focused more on an experiential process for the students, with the psycho-educational component being a secondary aspect. This emphasis on the unstructured experiential group process progressed through time and lost the formulaic psycho-educational piece (Rogers, 1970). Hence, the end result became a blueprint for what became the Person-Centered Encounter Group.

Encounter Groups range from basic encounter groups, large community group[s], international cultural diversity group[s], group therapy, Person-Centered training groups, conflict resolution groups, and Person-Centered organizational groups (Bozarth, 1998). The role of the facilitator of Encounter Groups differs from that of other psychological orientations in that the facilitator does not use his or her expertise to control the mood, topic or outcome, resulting in a role that is more participant than leader (Rogers, 1970). This is consistent with the Person-Centered approach, which purports that the therapist is not the expert. However, even though Encounter Groups attempt to reject a hierarchical structure and concentrate on equality, an inherent danger exists in ignoring potential power differentials, as it contradicts the very nature of the process (Proctor, 2002).

Because of the variety of contexts in which Encounter Groups have been convened, the non-prejudicial openness to member enrollment, the relatively small community size, and the tenet of equality between members, it is inevitable that multiple relationships and power differentials will exist. Multiple relationships transpire when a psychology professional serves in a professional capacity with a person, while simultaneously being in another role with the same person (Behnkeapa, 2004). While they are discouraged in some theoretical orientations, multiple relationships within Encounter Groups are common and even encouraged. For example, a professor may encourage his or her student to attend an Encounter Group. In theory, the authoritative role of professor to student no longer exists when they exit the professional relationship and become Encounter

Group participants; however, in reality the unspoken power differential still exists.

In reference to Encounter Groups, Bozarth states, “[w]hen people feel fundamentally free to be who they are at the moment, they move in constructive directions” (1998, p. 156), and postulates that Encounter Groups facilitate freedom for participants to become aware of one’s organismic process. Yet, in the same article, he discusses personal power in Encounter Groups, but makes no mention to the power of others (Bozarth, 2005). He does not acknowledge the possibility that some people may not feel “fundamentally free” because of a multiple relationship or power differential. Furthermore, it is possible that Bozarth’s sweeping statement that Encounter Groups facilitate freedom contributes to the fear some members might have about acknowledging when they feel incongruent in the group process out of fear of reprisal outside of the confines of the Encounter Group.

Thus, an unrecognized and unspoken power differential exists in Encounter Groups, and it creates hierarchal relationships among members. This dynamic is most pronounced between individuals who have perceived power (e.g., “the pillars” of the community, group facilitators, professors, renowned therapists, experienced Encounter Group members) and those individuals who are newer to the Person-Centered community (e.g., students, clients, budding therapists). The distinction between those with perceived power and new individuals can be fluid. For example, a student who has attended a few Encounter Groups may be considered having lower power in one group, but may be considered a person in power to a first-time participant. Conversely, a well-known professor who has never participated in an Encounter Group might be considered less powerful in the group, but more powerful outside of the group. Multiple relationships confound this intrinsic hierarchal system, stifling newer participants for fear of possible repercussions from contributions within the group from those in perceived power. Repercussions could include not being considered for a practicum, internship or job position, receiving low grades in school, rupturing therapeutic alliance, or not being referred clients. Whether or not these repercussions actually exist is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the authors aim to illuminate the idea that the fear caused by power differentials is very real and could be an unwanted byproduct of the multiple relationships that are allowed in

Encounter Groups, and this fear could inhibit a newer participant's genuineness when contributing within the group.

A common misconception of multiple relationships is that they are inherently unethical. This is not the case, and frequently multiple relationships are unavoidable and/or beneficial (Behnkeapa, 2004). For instance, faculty interaction has been shown to have a positive effect on student success; hence, these relations have been encouraged even in informal social settings (Holmes, Rupert, Ross & Shapera, 1999). Nevertheless, despite potential positives of these relationships, the burden of recognizing the power differential in these relationships falls upon the more experienced individual (Behnkeapa, 2004, Holmes, et al., 1999).

The most notable form of power is expert power. The feminist and Person-Centered author, Gillian Proctor, acknowledges that her clients give her expert power due to her status as a clinical psychologist (2002). In Encounter Groups, this expert power can be described as the new individual's perception that the more experienced therapist is more knowledgeable (Fiske, 2004). For instance, a new Person-Centered practitioner attending the Warm Springs Encounter Group is in awe of a highly published and renowned Person-Centered therapist and Encounter Group facilitator. Possibly unknown to this "expert," the newer practitioner could idealize or even idolize the renowned therapist due to this perceived expert power. Therefore, simply because of her expert status, she now has power over the newer practitioner. The presence of this expert power is evident in an article by two doctoral students in the Counseling Psychology Program at The University of Georgia. The students describe themselves as "newcomers" to the Warm Springs Encounter Group, but refer to the seasoned veterans and well-known community members as "masters," a word synonymous with expert (Altschul & Steadman, 1996).

When the dynamic of multiple relationships enter into Encounter Groups, "reward" and "coercive" powers (Fiske 2004) take effect. As it pertains to Encounter Groups, reward power is a newcomer's perception that the person with perceived power controls benefits; for example, an newcomer may believe that if he says something that parallels an experienced person's comment, he may be rewarded in some way (e.g., friendship, compliment, passing grade, internship). Conversely, coercive power is when the newer person perceives that the experienced person controls punishments, as

illustrated by a new person's belief that if he says something contrary to a comment by the more established individual, the newcomer could experience punishments, such as being humiliated or shamed, or fear a more concrete consequence, such as receiving poor grades or not getting a practicum site (Fiske, 2004).

A common power differential in Encounter Groups is between professor and student, so it is important to examine this specific multiple relationship. In a qualitative analysis of faculty student, multiple relationships of six full-time faculty members and 16 full-time counseling students were surveyed. The findings suggested that the professors saw a potential for harm due to problems with objectivity; yet, the professors generally trusted their peers to be responsible to maintain this objectivity. Contrarily, the student participants were more fearful that their professors would not be able to maintain objectivity resulting in possible exploitation (Kolbert, Morgan & Brendal, 2002). Consequently, although they deem themselves and each other as able to maintain their objectivity, the professors might well be blinded to the power they possess, as well as the students' fears that they are incapable of maintaining their objectivity, which correlates with the multiple relationship found in Encounter Groups. Whether or not the consequences actually exist for the students or newer members, the fear is real. As such, because a faculty member undoubtedly holds a more dominant position, he or she must also hold the accountability for recognizing and appraising the appropriateness of this multiple relationship (Kolbert et al., 2002).

In conclusion, the idea that people refrain from being genuine with those in power is not a new concept. Most people do not argue with their bosses on topics that can be controversial or disagreeable, or act in ways that are incongruent with the manner that is deemed appropriate within a specific setting. However, in Encounter Groups, people are encouraged to discuss or comment about whatever they want. In fact, one of the joys of Encounter Groups is that they have no agenda. Yet within these groups lie professors, employers, future employers, and even clients' therapists, who have a direct connection to consequences outside of the group. The unrecognized power differential in Encounter Groups may limit an individual's congruence and genuineness in the Encounter Group process, to which the person with perceived power may be oblivious. Since a core condition of the Person-Centered theory is empathic understanding (Rogers, 1957,

1959), and these conditions are ideally held within Encounter Groups (Bozarth, 1998), it is imperative for those with a perception of power to acknowledge the possibility that their perceived power could inhibit a newcomer's authenticity. While the idea of equality within Encounter Groups is revolutionary, the application of this concept is unrealistic.

Yet, this paper is by no means a war cry or a call for dissension amongst the Person-Centered ranks. It is a call for more experienced individuals to recognize that power differentials and multiple relationship exist, that others might perceive them as individuals with power, and that this power, especially in the form of a multiple relationship, might inhibit newcomer's congruence regarding their contributions to group discussions. With this in mind, experienced Person-Centered individuals can mentor, positively influence and educate newcomers to the community, and the newcomers might benefit from admiring those individuals who have contributed to the Person-Centered legacy. These connections can form indelible relationships that can benefit their lives in a multitude of ways.

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