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T-Groups: Therapy or Training

MARIA PAZ BELTRAN

TO the uninitiated, the term T-Group often arouses a certain amount of apprehension. Its introduction is inevitably followed by the question, "What does the 'T' stand for?" the implication being "I know very well it's a bad disguise for therapy, so don't try to fool me." The answer to this question is nothing less prosaic than that the "T" stands for training. To which the immediate response is "training in what?" And this is where the dialogue begins to falter for the procedures, goals, and outcomes of training groups are as varied as there are trainers and members.

GOALS

The goals of a T-Group vary from group to group depending very much on the composition of the group, the individual members, and the style of the trainer. They are influenced by age and personality factors, by present and previous affiliations of the members to other groups, by the members' commitment to the T-Group experience.

However, most T-Groups include as their explicit objectives the following: (1) increased self-insight and self-knowledge; (2) increased understanding of the conditions which facilitate effective group functioning; (3) increased understanding of interpersonal operations in a group (the rational-intellectual aspects as well as the emotional conditions); and, (4) development of diagnostic skills in individual, group, and organizational behavior (Schein and Bennis, 1965).

Variations on these four objectives occur with varying degrees of emphasis on one goal over other goals, again depending very much on the felt needs of each of the members and the trainer's own conception of the objectives. In the T-Groups run by the author the primary emphases have been on heightening the individual's awareness of self, on increasing his insights into his own feelings, reactions to and impact on others, and on increasing his awareness of the feelings, reactions and impact of others on himself. A related objective has been to increase the individual's ability to handle his emotions and the emotional undercurrents in group discussions to the advantage of the group.

These two objectives have been stressed because it is felt that Filipinos in groups suffer from a misguided sense of "Christian charity" and feelings of *pakikisama* which prevent the individual from becoming aware of and accepting his true feelings and reactions to others, and which, conversely, inhibit the others from accepting and expressing their true feelings and reactions. This tends to result in the repression of data, intellectual and emotional (attitudinal), which are necessary to the group if it is to arrive at an effective decision to which all the members are committed.

What often occurs is that many members allow the so-called leaders or chairmen to present what they, the leaders and chairmen, feel are pertinent information and to make decisions only on the basis of these data without consideration or awareness of what the members think or feel. The members, on the other hand, accept this situation because it has been the traditional pattern of group functioning. At the same time, the members very often inwardly disagree with their leaders. This behavior is rationalized on the basis of "Christian charity" or *pakikisama*. Members refrain from speaking out what they truly feel and think in order "not to hurt the other person," in spite of the possibility that what they hold back may actually be most beneficial to the full functioning of the group.

However, this pattern of behavior does serve a function for the individual, a function which the T-Group is able to bring to consciousness. This function is often one of defense,

that is, a defense of the self. In the guise of "not hurting the other person," the individual is actually defending himself by saying to the other "I won't say what I really think or feel, about you or your ideas because I don't want to hurt you," at the same time implying, "now you can't say what you really think and feel of me." Thus, "not hurting the other person" is not a true consideration of the other but an insurance against exposing oneself to the possibility of an honest encounter with oneself and with the others. Precisely because of this, decisions are made with incomplete data and with little commitment by the members to the decision.

Underlying these explicit goals are highly relevant but vague, un verbalized values or meta-goals. These meta-goals generally determine the course of action and outcomes of membership in the T-Group. They tend to transcend the explicit goals and allow for the integration of these goals by the individual into his behavioral system. These meta-goals are two-fold: the values of science and the values of democracy (Schein and Bennis, 1965).

The values of science include the spirit of scientific inquiry, of experimentalism, of learning from the here-and-now experience, of questioning old behavior and trying out new modes of behavior. The outcome of this spirit of inquiry is another meta-goal, that of expanded consciousness and choice, of opening new alternatives to action, of a realization that action implies choice and not mere conformity to traditional structures and orders. The T-Group member is encouraged to think about his behavior, to become aware of and sensitive to himself and to others, to think about how he chooses to behave.

The second set of values is that of democracy. These values center on the elements of interdependent and cooperative activity and the rational resolution of conflict on the intellectual and effective levels. There is implied in these values a true respect for the self and for the other, a recognition of each individual's worth in contributing to the group effort. Thus interdependence rather than legalistic, linear authority is the crucial element.

Important too is another meta-goal: that of authenticity in interpersonal relations, an acceptance and birth valuation for the expression of feelings and their effects, an acceptance of emotions as valid data. This value is an important one in creating an atmosphere where interpersonal communication is free, where lines of communication within oneself and with others can be established, where each individual member can be fully congruent in himself and in turn allow others to be as fully congruent.

TECHNIQUE

What is the process by which these goals, both explicit and implicit, can be examined and internalized? The technique of T-Groups is to bring together, within communicating and demonstrable distance, a number of individuals under a trainer. The group is usually composed of from 8 to 15 members with a trainer and sometimes a co-trainer.

The T-Group is often described as a laboratory technique. Its primary tool is the here-and-now situation, where each member in the group is both participant and observer.

The assumption under which the T-Group operates is that the most fruitful and meaningful way to learn is by examining one's own experience. In the T-Group, the phenomena under consideration are the development of a group and the dynamic interpersonal relations in the group. These phenomena can best be understood by the experience of actively engaging in the process of becoming a group, of creating a new community and writing its history. This is the participant aspect of T-Group membership. Learning, then, derives from the member's own experience in the group process and from his analysis of this experience. This is the observer aspect of T-Group membership.

The learning process develops in an unstructured situation. This is not to say that the T-Group has no structure, that it remains a free-wheeling free-for-all, that *laissez-faire* is the rule. What it means is that there are no pre-set structures, no super-imposed leader, no pre-determined agenda, norms, patterns of communication. In other words, the T-

Group does not follow the traditional structure of most groups, the structure imposed on members by a leader, on a leader by society, on society by who knows whom. The group is left to its own resources to decide on a structure that is relevant to itself. The members of the group decide on its course of action, its goals, its tasks, its decisions. In this novel situation, the members are forced to re-examine and re-evaluate their expectations, their modes of acting in a group and of relating to people. The climate is such that each member has to rethink things out for himself, to experiment with new modes of behavior in coping with the situation, to establish new roles, to discover the norms, the patterns of communication, the solutions, taking into account the differences in member needs. Thus, the structure derives from the group, from the felt needs of the members, from the task at hand. The T-Group then, is a self-structuring group.

Typically, many groups in the Philippines initially fall back on a parliamentary form of conducting a meeting. This seems to be the easy way out. But when the members are forced to re-evaluate this form, to analyze its relevance to their needs and their tasks, they tend to find that it is no longer adequate, that it does not work in the new situation. It is then that the group begins to restructure itself, developing a system of roles, norms, patterns of communication and decision-making that is best suited to its needs and its tasks.

Being thus left to fend for oneself usually results in tremendous emotional confusion. The first few minutes after the trainer's introduction are characterized by stunned silence, accompanied by mounting anxiety. The members are faced with the dilemma of wanting to do something but not knowing quite what to do because their stereotyped expectations have been shattered. All "reliable" forms of support have been removed and the members are faced only with themselves and each other. Here is where the learning experience begins. Through the ensuing interaction or lack of interaction the members are able to acquire a consciousness and an understanding of the tensions within themselves and the repercussions of their behavior on the group process. One of the main tensions which

often arise in Filipino T-Groups revolves around a need to depend on authority figures to 'get things started.' The result of this tension is the emergence of dysfunctional dominance by a few members in the group and its rejection by others. This often leads to the insight that the responsibility 'to get things started' lies not in any one member but rather in everyone.

The role of the trainer is to act as a reflector of the group's pulse. As such, he is more than an unconcerned spectator. He is very much a part of the group's history and is just as involved in the process as any of the other members. For only by his authentic participation in the group can he come close to feeling accurately and interpreting to the group the dynamics of the here-and-now situation.

The trainer works mostly through interventions (Schein and Bennis, 1965), that is, through bringing into focus the events and underlying attitudes and tensions which otherwise would go unobserved but which have a direct bearing on the process. He might, for example, comment on the members' feelings of anxiety and confusion in the face of the unstructured situation. Such an intervention would serve to focus on the individual's reactions to the novel situation, reactions which if left unrecognized could hamper the growth of the group.

According to Bion (1959), these interventions should be made when 1) the trainer feels that the group has developed an attitude towards him; 2) the trainer feels that the group has developed an attitude towards a member; and, 3) when an individual acts as if he thinks the group has developed an attitude toward himself. These types of interventions emphasize the importance of affective tones in any group effort and the place of attitudes even in intellectual discussions.

However, interventions are also made about other aspects of the group process. Thus, Thelen (1954) includes and, in fact, emphasizes interventions on problem-solving aspects, and on relating the group experience to a general methodology. He does, however, also include interventions on the state of relationships between work and emotionality in the group. In the

T-Groups run by the author most trainer interventions have focused on bringing out the affective and attitudinal aspects of group interaction.

Through trainer interventions the group is able to take steps toward acquiring the necessary data upon which courses of action can be determined and changes effected. However, this is not to say that interventions are made by the trainer alone. In fact, as the members develop their diagnostic skills, they tend to take over this trainer function.

T-Group sessions run from an hour and a half upwards. Usually a time limit is proposed both for the duration of each session and for the total number of sessions. These limits, however, are not rigidly imposed and very often sessions extend their allotted time. The purpose for setting limits is to force the group to set its pace of work.

Meetings may be spaced as infrequently as once a week or as intensively as 2 or 3 whole days. Spacing meetings too far apart creates a problem with regard to the continuity of an integrated learning experience. Cramming the sessions too closely also becomes detrimental when the individual is prevented from attempting an on-going process of self-integration as new levels of self-knowledge and interpersonal insights are reached. The optimal spacing for meetings appears to be one that is frequent enough to allow easy integration of the learning experience, not one that results in a piece-meal series of events; one also, in which time is allowed for new insights to be integrated by the individual.

Meetings may be conducted in a "cultural island" atmosphere. That is, members are removed from their every-day milieu and isolated elsewhere as a group. This is of course an ideal situation because it ensures at least some form of physical commitment. None of the T-Groups run by the author has been conducted in this manner as of now. It has been found that even while keeping the members in their natural setting, it is still possible for the T-Group technique to work effectively. However, it appears that some demand must be made on members in order to ensure, at least, initial commitment.

T-GROUPS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Although the learning experience in a T-Group has a highly personal, existential here-and-now focus, the change which occurs, if and when it does occur, can be said to be effective only if it is carried over into the other social systems to which the individual belongs. This is where training groups and therapy differ. In therapy, the criteria for cure are determined by the therapist and the patient within the clinical context. The change is gauged through this one-to-one relationship. However, in training groups, the focus is on social learning and on social interaction. Thus the change is gauged not only by the individuals in the group but more importantly by the individual's performance in other social systems outside the training group. (Schein and Bennis, 1965.)

The training group becomes, as it were, a microcosm of the macro-group, society. Each individual brings with him the summation of his interactive experience, past and present, subjective and objective. In effect, he becomes a representative of that which he is and that which has made him so. He is not a prototype. He is himself, a unique individual, a unique self to be understood and known, but a product of his inner life and of his social conditioning. Thus while he remains the unique individual that he is, he is also an experience of comparable others in society.

At this point, I would like to give a brief account of the first T-Group run at the Ateneo Graduate School, Department of Psychology. The group was composed of fourteen members and one trainer. In this group a varied cross-section of society and of social roles was represented: priests, foreigners, students, teachers, business manager, married man, married woman, single girls, eligible bachelor. There was also a considerable range of ages represented from a girl just out of college, to three men in their middle ages. Personality styles were just as varied from the shy timid girl, to the domineering aggressive woman; the insecure sensitive young man, to the confident businessman.

The members knew that the course would be a practicum in group dynamics but their expectations were of a structured

learning situation where the professor would dictate the exercise for the day, the roles to be played, the topics to be discussed. Instead, the class was told that the course would consist primarily of T-Group sessions. With the exception of one, the members had no idea of T-Groups. The trainer explained to the members that the basis for learning was going to be their own experience as participants in the process of becoming a group and that she was not there as a professor or even as a group leader. In other words, she was not going to tell them "what to do." She explained that the group was going to be self-directing.

The shattering of all traditional expectations resulted in the first learning experience for the members. All of a sudden, they were denied a set of assumptions which previously had determined their behavior in groups. This novel situation created a lot of confusion, frustration and anxiety but it also forced the members to re-evaluate their expectations and their usual patterns of behavior.

The interaction among members at this point was very restrained. People were very polite and reserved. Actions were directed towards maintaining a smooth surface. Relationships were determined by the social roles of each member outside the group, thus maintaining the appropriate social distance. For example, priests were deferred to by the laymen because this was the socially approved pattern. The women remained quiet because their social role demanded that they let the men talk.

At this stage, there was a lot of silence, broken by nervous laughter and anxious attempts by a few to start a discussion. There was much of un verbalized hostility against the trainer who, the members felt, was manipulating the group by not stating what she wanted the group to do or where she wanted the group to go. There were also manipulative attempts on the part of the group to try and get the trainer to assume the leadership role, thus making their position more comfortable. When these attempts failed, the group decided to fall back on a tried pattern of group functioning by electing a chairman, preparing an agenda and choosing a "safe" topic

(that is, a topic far enough removed from the group so that no "toes" would be stepped on).

All these traditional patterns were tried only to be met by half-hearted participation, polite disinterest, repressed hostilities and more frustration. The members found that these patterns of group functioning were not satisfying. This led to a re-evaluation of personal goals of membership in the group and an attempt to formulate group goals that would take into account the needs of each of the members.

Problems of intimacy, participation and feedback processes were brought up. How well did people have to know each other in order to be able to communicate? What did "knowing the other person" mean? Did it mean that each person had to reveal all his secrets? Or did it mean that each person was willing to express fully what he thought and felt, at the same time allowing the other person to do the same? What did participation mean? Was participation purely verbal? Was verbalizing necessarily participation? Or did participation mean involvement, either verbal or non-verbal? What were the conditions which facilitated or blocked feedback? What was feedback? Why was it so important? All these problems were dealt with as they were revealed in the group interaction.

Early in the history of the group, a personality clash arose between two of the members, resulting in much anxiety among the others; the hostilities and antagonisms between the two members could not be ignored and the members found themselves reacting to the conflict, becoming involved. The conflict was such that the group would have remained static unless it were resolved. But resolving the conflict required a re-orientation of an un verbalized norm in the group: that of maintaining smooth interpersonal relations at all costs. Retaining this norm meant not expressing one's true feelings so as not to hurt anyone. But retaining this norm also meant disrupting the progress of the group in its attempts to form itself, to become cohesive, to move forward. A conflict therefore between two members became a group conflict which could be resolved only by the group itself.

The members, however, were not used to dealing objectively with emotions of hostility or aggression either in themselves or in others. Members tried disguising what they truly felt, made strong attempts to suppress the problem, or tried polite, tactful maneuvers to get the two antagonists to "shake hands and make up." As a result, a lot of evaluative, judgmental statements were made which only served to disrupt the group even more. Once the conflict was openly recognized and discussed, the members were able to see the constructive possibilities of an open acceptance and discussion of feelings. From then on emotions and feelings became valid data for discussion and problem-solving.

The early stages of the T-Group were marked by a strong dependency behavior on the part of the members toward the trainer. In the later stages, these dependency needs were transferred into counterdependency measures by a few of the more aggressive and independent members. At this period in the group's history, the persons who did the most talking became the leaders. This period was also marked by a rejection of the trainer. The trainer's interventions were politely listened to and then ignored. The trainer nevertheless could not be completely rejected and when, at one point, a member suggested throwing the trainer out of the group since he felt the trainer's presence was inhibiting the group, the other members were quick to rise to the defense of the trainer and reassure her that she was still liked and needed by the group.

This period was characterized by an attempt to resolve the authority-leadership relationship. A polarization between "talkers" and "non-talkers" arose. The "talkers" became the leaders on whom the "non-talkers" depended to get the group started but they were also the objects of much hostility and resentment. Each group felt manipulated by the other. The "non-talkers" never took the initiative but always criticized the "talkers" for whatever attempts they made in trying to attain the goals they had set for the group. The "talkers" on the other hand felt the responsibility for taking the initiative but did not receive any support for their attempts.

The "talkers" then decided to relinquish their leadership functions and began prodding the "non-talkers" and exerting pressure on them to contribute to the group, to assume some responsibility in solving the group's problems and to show the necessary behavior as the occasion demanded. The "talkers" were then accused by the "non-talkers" of being naggers and pushers. Apparently, the "non-talkers" were not willing to accept the leadership from anyone but the trainer and when this was denied, they also refused to accept any part of the responsibility for the group. They criticized the trainer for not doing her job as they saw it, they criticized the "talkers" for taking over, but they also refused to take any initiative.

Only when the "non-talkers" were able to say to the "talkers" "stop nagging me and I'll be more willing to accept the responsibility" was the group able to move on. Although the change had been gradual, it was at this time that the realization came that in order for the group to get anywhere, interdependent patterns of leadership were necessary. From then on, the participants became freer, more spontaneous, and, above all, more productive. At the same time, all the members became more satisfied with their membership in the group.

The relationships that were established in this group were personal relationships; that is, the response was made to the person not to the prototype he or she represented. Thus, the relationships with the foreigner were formed with him primarily as a person. In the beginning at least he had also been reacted to as representative of the segment in society labeled foreigner. In relating to this person, the Filipinos in the group were able to come to terms with their attitude, their typical modes of reacting to foreigners. They were able to examine these attitudes and modes of behavior and receive feedback from the individual concerned. Consequently, they were able to re-evaluate their attitudes and modes of behavior and change them. At the end of the sessions, many of the Filipinos in the group expressed the feeling that they were glad they had had this opportunity to know a foreigner as a person and that it had changed their attitudes and modes of responding to other foreigners. This feeling was reciprocated by the foreigners in

the group. Much the same impression was also expressed about the relationship between the lay people and the priests in the group.

A less dramatic change was shown by a young girl who had been very inhibited at the beginning of the sessions. At first she had been unable to see why. Eventually, it came out that she would clam up whenever one of the women in the group started talking and especially when this woman insisted that she talk. She was able to realize this when members in the group pointed out the woman's behavior and her reaction to this woman. The young girl was then able to tell the woman to leave her alone, that she was going to talk when she wanted to.

Within the micro-society of the T-Group, members are able to deal with themselves in relation to others and to the group, and to deal with others and the group in relation to themselves. The micro-society of the T-Group presents a manageable situation where the phenomena found in society can be demonstrated in the concrete, in the here-and-now process, in the existential experience where the individual member is actor-spectator-director. He is an actor in that he is directly responsible for the events which take place either through his active participation or his passive withdrawal. But his very presence or non-presence has a direct bearing on the group and he is able to see this. In other words, he reacts and is reacted to. He is a spectator in that he is able to observe himself in the group, where he can step back and analyze, attempt to understand and explain, where he can formulate new hypotheses for action. He is a director in that he can choose his course of action, he can try new modes of behavior.

The T-Group, unlike the therapy session, is not a respite from life. Rather it is a laboratory for life, an intensification of living, where even non-involvement is a commitment with demonstrable repercussions.

Because of this, the T-Group experience is an emotionally involving one. In many cases, it is like going through an emo-

tional wringer. It requires the whole presence of the individual. One member of a T-Group once described this involvement very aptly. In attempting to find an answer to the question of what the "T" stood for, he made a sign across his forehead and down his face. To the looks of perplexity, he said, "Well, do you mean that we are present here with our eyes, ears, nose and mouth?" This is as clear and dynamic a statement of what involvement in a T-Group means; a commitment, an investment of the whole person, a risk taken into the process of interacting with and reacting to the individuals in the group, a commitment which requires a response whether it is of jumping into the life of the group or running away from it. And it is where the greatest investment is made, where the greatest risk is taken that change can occur. An interesting insight achieved by a T-Group member after the sessions had ended was that he realized he had profitted very little from the experience because he had not invested much, had not become involved.

OUTCOME

A striking outcome from the T-Group previously described was that the businessman in the group began running T-Group style conferences with the salesmen under him. This is an instance where what had been learned in the T-Group was being transferred to the original social system of a member.

For some, the T-Group experience results in a deep personal change. One member describes this change as: "The experience made me more secure of myself. It gave me the boost I needed, as well as better control over my emotions so as not to antagonize people in a group discussion. It thus taught me how to run a group discussion better, and to be able to push without hurting." Another member, in giving his impressions says: "They [the members in the group] make you realize who you are and what you are, that you come to know, understand, and accept yourself better. You emerge a new man—a man who is richer for he has gained insight into himself and other people." A young girl who had been very shy and

quiet during the first few sessions felt that the T-Group experience had made her less afraid to come out and speak. This change was evident in a comparison of her behavior during the first few meetings with the later sessions. It was the need to rely on herself because of the unstructured situation that had brought about the change. Her consequent contributions to the group were well received, a fact that reinforced her new mode of behavior.

For a few, the experience does not have much meaning either because of a lack of involvement or because of the strong emotional strain. As one T-Group member put it: "One thing I learned is that I will never join another T-Group." On the whole, most who go through a T-Group profit from the experience, even if what they learn cannot be categorized or assigned a grade.

We cannot attempt to change society. We cannot even attempt to change individuals in society. We can shout our interpretations of the ills of society and of individuals in society but this does not assure us that we have been heard. But in bringing a group together, it is possible to demonstrate the characteristics of the group and the individuals in it. It is then possible to have our interpretations heard. It is then possible to witness the evidence on which the interpretations are based.

Thus, by placing individuals in a training group, it may be possible to change not only these few individuals but also the social system to which they belong.

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