Explore the Opportunities and Challenges Presented by Being Part of a Group

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Student Name: Ervin Vastag

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Mearns (1997, pp. 153-155) identified eight functions of large group meetings. These are sharing information, making communal decisions, raising personal issues, raising course issues, working with conflict, keeping track of realities, 'coming out '(sharing the hidden part of the self) and experimenting with congruence.

Gillon (2007, p. 174) suggested that the work conducted in group contexts is seen to represent a ‘microcosm’ of society and viewed as the vehicle through which different types of people and personalities may be encountered. Therefore, group working can be a "key mechanism through which trainees can understand more about themselves and how they relate to a range of other people". Consequently, person-centred courses are often viewed as ‘therapeutic communities’ (Mearns, 1997, cited in Gillon, 2007, p. 174)

A survey by Hill (2002, cited in Gillon, 2007, p. 174) suggests that the large group is seen by counselling tutors as having the following functions: enhancing connectiveness between course members, experiential learning in translating counselling theory into practice, enhancing selfhood by enabling positive personality change, creating a social microcosm where social issues (e.g. prejudice) are explored, as an arena for interpersonal learning through developing listening and communication skills and as a means for maintaining the 'health' of the course by allowing organisational issues to be addressed.

I am usually comfortable being in a large group because I am not in a spotlight. I do not need to talk, but I am free to contribute in any conversation. Sometimes I like to be quiet. I like to observe other people and to keep my thoughts to myself. Especially if I feel that my belief is different from the view of the majority. This can be frustrating, but I would not feel good rebelling and arguing either. Yet, sometimes I take the risk and I say what I want even if I am not understood. So, I definitely agree with Mearns (1997, p. 107) that a large group is undoubtedly a "vibrant context for raising issues and experimenting with self ". However, as Brodley and Merry (1995, cited in Gillon, 2007, p. 175) pointed out, large groups do not always offer gentle or positive experiences and the group can be experienced as a dangerous place when conflicts are exposed between members. They noted that the learning in such experiences is often about how best to offer constructive feedback, cope with criticism in a non-defensive way or to maintain a congruent (genuine) stance in relation to a disagreement with others.

During encounter group sessions I have more opportunity to challenge group norms and to express my feelings more openly and honestly. Mearns and Cooper (2005) suggested that the purpose of encounter groups is to learn about self and others through the interactions in the group. They also noted that this is an opportunity to express feeling reactions, including the negative ones, towards each other.

Although I consider myself that I am able to put myself in other people's shoes, I find it difficult to judge my effect on other people where everybody has a different subjective reality. I have my own character, and due to who I am as a person, maybe for some people I am less easy to be accepted. Yet this can be a challenge for them to improve their skills. But in general, I think that my acceptance and empathy has a positive effect on them. Moreover, I am hoping that my worldview can help others to be more flexible and less biased and overly attached to certain ideologies and schemas that can alienate and disconnect us (e.g. theories, prejudices, politics, cultures, religions, lifestyles, etc.). Also, I think my weaknesses can show them that I am also a human, vulnerable and imperfect.

When I started to participate in the large group, I did not know that being in a group has opportunities or challenges for me and that it is going to be important for our personal development. But I was wrong. I discovered that I am feeling uncomfortable, restless and fearful when I am talking about my feelings and my problems. In everyday life I usually keep my problems for myself and I deal with them on my own. I do not like complaining and making other people feeling my negative emotions. Sometimes it feels like going against myself by talking about the painful and sensitive aspects of my life. Also, when I am talking about bad and negative feelings, I have a feeling that I am constantly depicting myself as a negative and weak person with no qualities. But if I am not honest, open and genuine regarding my feeling about myself, I can distance myself from others and it may undermine my relationship with them. As I do not want this to happen in the group, I try to be genuine.

Previously I was not even aware about this shaky uncomfortable feeling because I was usually hidden behind my 'mask', pretending that I am fine. According to Orr (2012), many people are wearing a 'mask' and they are showing only those things that they think of as acceptable by others. Behind their mask they often have a fear that their weaknesses are going to be exposed and judged. They are scared to be genuine, yet, at the same time they are desperate to be understood. He also stated that behind their masks they feel safe, but as they are constantly adding new layers that seem to protect them, this facade becomes harder and harder to maintain. They become mentally exhausted with their prison that can lead to depression and anxiety. The cure is to start showing their real and authentic selves to the world. But they need to feel safe to uncover the layers and that is why people go to qualified counsellors.

Group works are also unique opportunities to begin uncovering the layers of our masks. In our group we are in a safe place where we are not judged and everything that we say is confidential. We can gradually reveal and free ourselves from our masks so we can feel better about ourselves and we can build more genuine relationships. I have noticed that my relationship with the group has changed since the beginning of the course. At the beginning I think I was a bit more distanced and closed. This attitude eventually somewhat reflected back from others, but as I made an effort to be more open and spontaneous, gradually I managed to make a better connection with most of the group members. Yet, maybe I should not please everyone just to make a good relationship with them. I need to find the balance and the right attitude toward others while I am trying to be authentic. This is an ongoing process and perhaps one of my major challenges too.

Sometimes I have difficulties to accept compliments or criticism from the group. Being part of the group provides an opportunity to overcome this problem. I was unable to do this in the past. Looking back on my life, there were many people around me who were praising themselves and who were talking pejoratively about others. They were probably doing this to gain some good kind of feeling about themselves. Although I do not like talking negatively about others, I noticed that sometimes I like to show off. Yet, I do not like when I am praising myself.

I missed the love and I was judged during my life. This lack of positive regard and the conditions of worth had a negative effect on my self-worth and self-esteem. According toThorne (2003, pp. 31-32), we think, feel and behave in ways that others have told us are worthy of love and respect. Internalisation of conditions of worth and the sense of the personal worthlessness can make the person divorced from the experience. The fact that I am not used to receive compliments and that I might believe that I do not deserve it, causes a feeling of incongruence. I have been thinking about my self-esteem and self-worth for years and I realise that it does not depend only on my personal success. Working on my self-worth and on the incongruence is a big challenge for me.

Rogers (1951, p. 156) defined that our values and standards depend upon the judgments and expectations of others, or are based on a reliance upon our own experience. I believe my large group experience already had some positive effect on my self-worth. Also, I think, I am getting less stressed about what other people think about me. Ellis (2000, p. 176) suggested that "emotional disturbance is frequently associated with caring too much about what others think".

### Mearns (1997) and Gillon (2007) suggested numerous functions and opportunities that group meetings offer. To sum up, the main opportunities and challenges that I recognised and that I am focusing at the moment are related to my effort to be understood and to be a genuine while I want to be protected as well. In addition, I am striving to have better reactions when I am dealing with positive and negative feedbacks (criticism and praising). The experience of being in the group can help me to not care too much about other people's opinion, yet, to be able to maintain connections. It can help me finding these balances and developing skills for personal development and for better communication.

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