Book Reviews

The Group Experience

Beyond Words. The Story of Sensitivity Training and the Encounter Movement. KURT W. BACK. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1972 (distributor, Basic Books, New York). xii, 266 pp. $7.95.

In this study, Kurt Back sets out to "capture a development in the science of man at the climax of its career as a social movement." His subject is sensitivity training, and it will be a long time before a better summary of it appears. The title of his book derives from the central property of sensitivity training—its rejection of history, of enduring structures, of abstraction and symbolism, in favor of direct, concrete group experiences that are immediate and intense. The prototypic format in which these experiences occur involves a reversal of taboos of ordinary society: "Frankness substitutes for tact, self-expression for manners, non-verbal techniques for language, and immediacy for responsibility."

The five sections of the book deal successively with the societal setting from which the movement arose; its scientific origins; its current practices, described in a six-chapter section that is the highlight of the book (see especially chapter 9, "Psych-Resorts," for the best summary available of what happens inside sensitivity groups); and the divisive dilemmas within the movement and forecasts about future developments and demise.

The scientific origins trace back to the work of Kurt Lewin and his followers on group dynamics, a theoretical field that became prominent in social science after the second World War and that offered promise of useful applications in adult education and in a variety of work and management settings. Back gives a detailed description of the workshop on group dynamics in 1946 at which the sensitivity training movement was born.

> Less than twenty-five years later, the types of workshops have proliferated; schools, industries, and government agencies use them in several guises. Thousands of participants go each month to some center to experience group methods. The many centers themselves have become a multimillion-dollar business. . . . The discovery of the value of self-confrontation and evaluation and the strong personal experiences connected with them has shown itself to be of unexpected value.

Also since those early days,

> within the movement, basic conflicts have arisen between its different functions. . . . Sensitivity training has ranged farther and farther away from traditional scientific work. It is treated at best as the outer fringe of group dynamics in discussions of social psychology, and research efforts and theoretical input by people in the movement have decreased almost continually since its inception. By contrast, some adherents of the movement still claim allegiance to social science. Many of them are professionals in the field. Requirements for some sensitivity practitioners include training . . . and trainers continue their efforts to legitimize the enterprise through the traditional channels.

Sensitivity training conceived of as a religiously oriented social movement is a distinctly U.S. phenomenon. It thrives here, it withers elsewhere. Why? Back argues that the American response to it is due to a combination of mobility, affluence, secularization, and social unrest. Sensitivity training solves the problem of mobility because norms of immediacy (attention to here and now) and letting go are conducive both to rapid integration into a new setting and to departure with minimal damage. Affluence leaves people with time and money to solve the problems created by money's failure to produce expected satisfactions; the solution involves investing in serious recreation devoted to regenerating the self. Secularization has removed the religious justification for the expression of strong emotions within a framework of ritual; the ideology, mysticism, and standard exercises of the sensitivity movement serve as substitutes that admit once more these strong experiences. The present social climate, in which increased societal tensions are expressed in political "confrontation," adds further impetus to the movement.

What sharpens this straightforward analysis is the fact that a control condition exists in Europe. In the academic sphere, there was a similar development of group methods at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, in London, but it did not prove nearly so contagious. Back argues that the movement was muted in Europe because Europe has less of a migratory tradition, there is less affluence because of the drain of postwar rebuilding, shifts from organized religion have been toward secular ideologies with definite orientations and rituals (Marxism, Fascism), "Europeans are better able to accept pleasure for pleasure's sake without a self-improvement justification," and there seems to be more attention to the tragic and paradoxical aspects of life and less to the idea that man is basically good and can reach his potentialities if only layers of obstacles are stripped away. Thus "sensitivity training may be more a symptom of what ails society than a cure for its ills." One value of this exposition is a practical one. The person who is undecided about participating in sensitivity training can use Back's analysis to reflect on his own circumstance, judge its deficiencies, and decide whether for him sensitivity training or some substitute activity might gratify needs that are unsatisfied within our society.

In Back's judgment the movement has demonstrated an important point. It has shown that you can throw together almost any kind of people who are roughly similar and with a few techniques generate strong emotions and a feeling among the participants that they have had an important experience. The group experience itself is invested with a pretense of close personal relationships such that the members use each other for verbal and physical self-expression, for gaining acceptance of weaknesses, and for roles in private fantasies and actions. The effect of this kind of interaction is that each act that occurs is exaggerated, each act reverberates in intense, prolonged discussion until it takes on intense emotional meaning. The trivial becomes significant under this scrutiny, and the uniqueness of the event contributes substantially to the eventual impression that something important happened, that the person has been changed. The nature and direction of the change, however, are less apparent.

Back has a shrewd eye for paradoxes within the movement. When trainers come under fire to adapt their procedures to emerging social problems, as when women and Blacks demand admittance to the profession, they resolve the

conflicts by traditional arguments, not by group techniques. During encounter sessions, strong emotions participants feel toward each other arise primarily because they treat each other as anonymous objects that facilitate and support acting out; thus participants are interchangeable rather than unique, and strong ties that develop between them actually originate in mutual exploitation. The movement typically uses science to overcome the scientific view of man, that is, it validates its claims to elevate man above the limits of rationality by invoking scientific methods and language, and interprets easy excitement as experimental research. It is common for trainers to criticize the morality of the marketplace because industrial firms take no responsibility for consequences of their actions; yet trainers take responsibility only for themselves, and trainees are left with the responsibility for whatever happens to them, be it boredom, joy, or suicide. The movement is criticized by laymen for leading people away from old traditions to new values and by scientists for the fact that no real change has been demonstrated for anyone. Finally, the movement portrays itself as a problem-solving technique that relies on everything but the cortex. With internal contradictions like this, it is not surprising that observers find sensitivity training an elusive activity to size up.

Aside from paradoxes, Back detects some serious questions that have been produced by the movement. The first has to do with the valuing of change for change's sake and the absence of any specification as to its desired direction or goal. Could a movement that espouses change be harnessed to any political ideology, whether benevolent or malevolent? Another question concerns sensitivity training in organizations. Stated globally the question is, how far ought an employer involve his employees for the good of the company? Exposure to organization-sponsored sensitivity training could do more to an individual than is warranted by his working relationship, which is only part of his life. It could affect everything an employee does and in that sense multiply rather than reduce the parts of his life that the employer controls. A related point is that sensitivity training may appear effective largely because it deals with a population that is self-selected by social background, personality, and cultural ideas. As people outside this population, with different philosophies and ways of life, are pressured to participate in the movement, there is a chance that they will be harmed rather than entertained, will find themselves with neither their original defenses nor effective substitutes. This issue is not trivial, since people in higher positions are being trained who influence increasingly large numbers of people below them. Finally, more traditional therapists such as psychiatrists are put in a considerable bind by the movement. If they present their basically negative evaluation of the movement, they run the risk of undermining their own position. Laymen have difficulty distinguishing between encounter groups and the conventional psychotherapy, hence discrediting the former may sink the latter.

There are at least two interesting lessons for social science in general implicit in Back's analysis. There is growing concern that science may shudder to a halt under the weight of proliferating information. If anyone should have buckled under this weight it is Back; even though the sensitivity movement espouses the nonverbal, it is decidedly verbal in its espousing. This book is a testimonial that Back did not buckle, and the reason seems to lie in his style of work, which encompasses personal experience in groups, interviewing both trainers and trainees, digesting both popular and technical articles, uncovering correspondence that highlights dilemmas, browsing in bookstores at "growth centers" (such as Esalen), examining transcripts of public hearings, and most of all keeping his eyes and ears open. This multi-method, quasi-ethnographic, backstage exploration has netted far more insight than is to be found in the conventional state-of-the-art literature review. The sociology-of-science thread he has followed lends a coherence to the subject that is impossible to find if one pays attention solely to items in the public domain. At a time of confused groping to decide how science can evaluate its own contributions and shortcomings, Back provides a compelling model of one way to do it well.

The second lesson has to do with the hazards to science of an offshoot that shares its status in the eyes of the public but has escaped its venerable controls. Laymen may bristle at supporting science, not because it uses esoteric practices with sporadic payoffs, but because its prestige and trappings are invoked to legitimate nonscientific activities from which the consumer is not protected.

Considering all that Back has described, what is likely to be the denouement? It may consist of this. While at the margins of the academy sensitivity proponents continue to build an emotional elite and to savor intense group experiences sans attention to intermediate problems, skeptics will continue to hold the establishment together and influence its course. And as the movement reaches its peak and begins the descent, the members of the elite, true to the title of a book of science fiction that is a bible of the movement, may find themselves more than ever "strangers in a strange land."

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Silent Articulation

Inner Speech and Thought. A. N. SOKOLOV. Translated from the Russian edition (Moscow, 1968) by George T. Onischenko. Translation edited by Donald B. Lindsley. Plenum, New York, 1972. x, 284 pp., illus. $22.50. Monographs in Psychology.

Many older American psychologists will remember the sterile discussion of whether all thought is or is not implicit speech, differing in kind from normal articulation only in the extent to which it is audible. A number of workers demonstrated early in the 20th century that silent recitation, reading, problem solving, and the like may be accompanied by manifestations of activity in various parts of the speech musculature, although that demonstration failed to settle the controversy. This book represents a basic advance on such simple demonstrations, in that it attempts to describe and explain the circumstances under which activity will be present in the motor speech system. Two methods are used: first, electromyographic measures are made of articulatory activity; second, subjects are made to articulate aloud while simultaneously executing some other task, and the deterioration of the task is measured.

The electromyographic studies reviewed (both the author's own and those of other workers) represent a technological advance over earlier work. Sokolov clearly recognizes the difference between demonstrating a generalized heightened state of tension in the ar-