

## **Encouragement Labs: A Didactic-Experiential Approach to Courage**

*Walter E. O'Connell*

*Veterans Administration Hospital, Houston, Texas*

### **Psychiatry's Sociohistorical Movement**

The popularity of the many forms of encounter and sensitivity training groups during the last decade might be explained in part by sociohistorical factors (O'Connell, 1971). In the past, descriptive psychiatry has viewed man as an isolated encapsulated entity. The emphasis has been on the discovery of psychopathology usually induced by unknown biochemical dysfunctions or early psychic traumata. The search for cures was conducted entirely through professional guidance and control, with a there-and-then emphasis upon recovering memories of past, noxious events and the addition of supportive physical treatment. Any incidental and here-and-now focus was to discover and group current symptoms for a psychiatric classification. Critics of this methodology have regarded such a diagnosis as a self-fulfilling prophecy and a precipitating factor in the poor prognosis of the average patient (O'Connell, 1964).

The encounter devotees, on the other hand, often regard man as purely a transactional creature, a product of social forces, needing beneficial interpersonal experiences but not subservient relationships with well-meaning but autocratic professionals. Whereas the descriptive professional harbors metaphoric premises of man as a rock-like monad, impervious to real change, the "touchy-feely" grouper unwittingly sees man as a "tabula rosa" sponge, lacking a hard core of Being, and at the mercy of vague social forces.

Neither the descriptive nor sensitivity schools of psychiatry have invented well-formulated concepts and behaviors which reflect the goal of treatments and encounters, "mental health". The concept of humanistic identification or HI (O'Connell, 1965) conceives of man as having both a relatively stable inner core (life style or existential-humanistic attitudes) and an innate potential for social intercourse (the need for power, seen as the ability to stimulate or resist interpersonal change). The emphasis in HI is focused upon teaching an awareness of one's current inner and outer movements which are responsible for lowering one's sense of personal worth (or self-esteem) and narrowing one's social interest (or feelings of similarity) with others. Dysfunctional and antisocial behaviors are the re-

sult of constriction of self-esteem and social interest in the services of maintaining one's perceived identity, however inadequate it might be.

At present there seems to be a burgeoning movement within dynamic psychology to search for the positive and de-emphasize traditional concern with negative behaviors only. At his last professional presentation, the late Rudolf Dreikurs (1972) spoke of the imperative need to invent a technology of interpersonal cooperation. Bullard (1973) perceives the necessity for family study groups to move into the relatively untouched area of defining and learning positive cooperative behavior rather than remain oriented toward negative labeling. In the larger scene of sensitivity training there is a similar emphasis on modeling and reinforcing the positive beyond mere talking about positive concepts (Walter & Miles, 1972). It is entirely conceivable that this will be the next Adlerian concern: "accentuate the positive, to eliminate the negative", to paraphrase slightly the words of a 30-year-old prophetic tune.

### Encouragement for What?

All of the efforts of Encouragement Labs are designed to teach the participants through lecturettes and experiences that they are not passive victims of their environments. People unwittingly select, "arrange", interpret, and openly react to their milieu. The principal lab premise is that social interest does not emerge full-blown in the absence of psychological complaints (symptoms) but needs to be explicitly taught, especially in a competitive society like ours where there are no institutionalized efforts to teach the movements and responsibilities of love. Social interest in its finest form - courage or active social interest - must be taught from the ground up for along with humor and love; courage as a learned social skill is totally ignored in the academic world.

Encouragement includes in its progressive repertoire of social skills the art of courage: giving and asking for feedback about peoples' reactions to one's behaviors and guessing at the goals of misbehavior (self and others). Encouragement in its most advanced state includes recognizing the importance of being open and self-disclosing and not provoking and reinforcing inequality (e.g., feelings of insignificance or feelings of significance in narrow non-contributory social roles). Encouragement labs point toward knowledge and practice of the humorous attitude, for there is no more encouraging or growth-precipitating person than one with a humorous attitude. Contrary to popular practice, encouragement is definitely not pampering. Yet almost one hundred students, asked to write on how they would encourage authority figures in their lives, gave examples more appropriate to pampering. In these examples, students behaved as if they did it would be ignored or retaliated against: so they made themselves discouraged. Encouragement is not such destructive pampering as

telling a person what he wants to hear about how wonderful he is, completely ignoring his motivated mistakes. Encouragement is a process of getting the message across, loudly and clearly, that one is responsible for constricting or expanding his feelings of self-esteem and belonging. To our partners in the ever-continuing human dyads, we are responsible for: (1) giving verbal and nonverbal approval to socially cooperative actions; (2) for not reinforcing behaviors in the service of self-esteem on the useless side of life; (3) for dissolving the relationship without blame or rancor in the event the dyadic partner gives the impressions of wanting to trap persons in the superior-inferior roles through competitive and/or hyperdependent identity games.

Encouragement labs may be conducted over any period of time, the minimum period being one day. In my opinion, labs are best which are flexible, where the director can watch for the need for further theoretical emphasis or exercises to help participants evaluate their skills as encouragers and where the groups alert themselves to signs of democratic group functioning. Groups can observe themselves or pair with another group to observe in group behavior at least the rudiments of democratic functioning: shared participation (or contributions to group creativity) and consensus by all group members. The longer the lab, the more data generated for feedback, together with greater opportunities for intergroup observations of democratic group atmosphere and interpersonal (and intrapersonal) encouragement.

A one-day lab begins with a focus on the participants' feelings and behaviors typical of entering a group of strangers, specifically to understand and help the other. The day ends on an exercise to develop the sense of humor, focusing on nondisruptive and uplifting reactions to stress. Stress in humor exercises is often that of separation from others and even from the self through eventual death. The elements of a hypothetical encouragement, subject to change at director and group discretion, follow:

### **Encouragement Lecturettes and Exercises**

1. Being present: Mill about nonverbally. Select partner. Build up to two groups.
2. Think about methods by which you can encourage: Group imagery. Director has groups relax, imagine movements of encouragement and possible dangers of encouraging.
3. Stop, Look and Listen to the other. "Sunset experience": you are in awe of Nature's masterpiece and don't try to pick it apart. Groups split into dyads. A views B on how B wants to be encouraged and fears concerning such. B later interviews A on same theme.

A's to center, B's observe. A's talk about partners views of encouragement. B's give feedback later on whether A's correct. Process reversed, with B's in center.

4. Clarify content, guess at feelings.

B's interview A's to rate A on self-esteem and social interest. B has already rated self independently. Director calls time periodically to have B's paraphrase A's content, guess at his feelings. Talk about difficulties in following task.

Shared ratings, talk of evidence used and reasons for differences between raters. Reverse process with A interviewing B.

5. Lecturette on how to lower self-esteem and social interest. Behavioral signs and purposes of such. Lecturette on 3 C's of interdependence (O'Connell, Choren, Wiggins, Hiner, 1973). Lecturettes on feedback and reinforcement of goals of misbehavior.

6. Natural High. Rate self on projected self-esteem and social interest one year from now. A interviews B, later B interviews A to find out what evidence the partner used to convince himself he'll be constricted at a future time. How does partner select and arrange the constricting environment? How can partner move to prevent constriction?

7. Practice in reinforcement--director plays types of constricted individuals, creatively searching for reinforcement on the useless side. One group tries to encourage, while other group watches and later gives feedback to partners. All groups have a chance for action.

8. Sense of humor (O'Connell and Brewer, 1971). Counselors in each group write down most stressful situations. Group selects one. Through psychodramatic techniques, director shows inner and outer movements of person which makes situation stressful. Other members model or double humorous responses to the situation to make the scene relatively non-stressful. (O'Connell, 1969).

In this shortened version of an encouragement lab, the stress upon finding something good (success bombardment), even to the point of congratulating creatively-arranged rejections, is eliminated. Similarly eliminated in a compact lab is role playing on four goals of misbehavior in childhood (the former time period is used, unless there has been sufficient information obtained on present group functioning). All kinds of further role playing is also missing. One example would be partners trying to get life style information, then playing negatively significant figures. Through these tasks, participants learn to give encouraging feedback under stress to the "mean SOB" rather than reinforce negative actions. Encouragement labs become so only through the movement of modeling behavior expected from others and reinforcing socially responsible, encouraging effort by others. We are all our brothers' keepers, in that we easily keep discouraging. By learning encouragement, we can become our brothers' nurturers instead.

## References

1. Dreikurs, R. Toward a technology of human relationship. *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1972, 38, 127-136.
2. Bullard, M. Four goal tunnel vision. Paper presented at American Society of Adlerian Psychology Association Meeting, Toronto, Canada, 1973.
3. O'Connell, W. The failure of psychotherapy in mental hospitals. *Indiv. Psychol.*, 1964, 2 (1), 24-27.
4. O'Connell, W. Humanistic identification, a new translation for Geheinschaftsgefuehl. *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1965, 21, 44-47.
5. O'Connell, W. Teleodrama. *Indiv. Psychol.*, 1969, 6 (2), 42-45.
6. O'Connell, W. Equality in encounter groups. *Indiv. Psychol.*, 1971, 8 (1), 15-17.
7. O'Connell, W. Sensitivity training and Adlerian Theory. *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1971, 27, 65-72.
8. O'Connell, W. and Brewer, D. The values of role reversal in psychodrama and action therapy. *Hdbk. Internat. Sociom.*, 1971, 6, 98-104.
9. O'Connell, W., Chorens, J., Wiggins, G. Natural High Therapy. *News/Res. Ment. Health Beh. Sci.*, 1973, 15 (2), 19-21.
10. Walter, G. and Miles, R. Essential elements for improving task group membership behaviors. Paper presented at American Psychological Association Meeting, Honolulu, Hawaii, September, 1972.

## Book Review

### **Self Psychotherapy**

*Albert Steinkirchner, M.D.*

*Aquin Publishing Co., 1608 Pacific Ave., Venice, CA 90291*

It is the major contribution of this book to present a new and more effective technique to enter and change the unconscious part of the personality. This technique is called "spontaneous introspection" by the author. It is a specific type of introspection, a way of looking into one's own mind. With the eyes closed one watches for those mental pictures that appear spontaneously across one's "mind's eye." One sees a parade of images. These tell a story that usually causes one to reexperience unresolved emotional struggles from childhood. One consciously relives and resolves conflicts that were formerly held in the unconscious part of the memory.

This simple "spontaneous introspection" activates the self-emergence process that the author calls self psychotherapy. It is described in detail in this book, and documented with extensive clinical material.

Though the technique of self psychotherapy is first published in this book, it has been well tested in my practice since 1964. It is a new way to explore the mind, and thus it has revealed fresh knowledge, some of which appears in this book in excerpts from the verbatim record of one woman's self psychotherapy. There is much new information about the psychology of femininity.