

Rock, Margaret ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8269-0599> (2019) Being human: how does the personal experience of participating in encounter groups support the development and practice of the encounter facilitator? *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*, 18 (4). pp. 325-333.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a definition of encounter and encounter groups based on the author's understanding and experience as a participant and facilitator. Through reflection on experience as a participant, consideration is given to how the self-awareness and insights gained from this can shape understanding of the role of facilitator, and how it enables what can be offered to groups as a facilitator. Theoretical contributions to understanding the role of the facilitator are considered. A strong relationship is proposed between experiences and gains as a participant and becoming an aware and helpful facilitator, arguing that experiences as a participant have the potential to contribute to the ability to trust both oneself and the facilitative potential of the group, tolerate uncertainty, hear others accurately and take risks.

Key words: encounter; group; facilitation; person-centered

What is 'encounter'?

My aim in writing about encounter is to articulate my own perspective on what encounter and the encounter group is, in the spirit of heuristic enquiry (Moustakas, 1990), aiming to capture something of the 'essence' of encounter. I do not see this as definitive in any way, but it may help to illuminate this elusive concept. I will use the terms 'encounter' and 'encounter groups' to refer specifically to those in the person-centered tradition, where the individuals involved have some understanding of, and, generally, a desire to co-create a group environment in which the intertwined 'necessary and sufficient' therapeutic conditions (Rogers, 1951, 1959) of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence are upheld, and experienced as interrelated. I define encounter as deep communication between people in which the individuals involved allow themselves to be seen in their vulnerability, and in which they may hope to present and express themselves without façade and with real honesty. Often, individuals aim to hold the intention of allowing the other(s) to speak their

‘truth’, and, to the best of their ability, endeavour to fully hear and understand this, without judgment. The type of communication sought in person-centered encounter originated in Buber’s (1958, pp. 19-20) description of ‘I-Thou’ relating, in which individuals listen with care to each other with an open heart and with honesty, creating a ‘genuine dialogue’ which enables both self knowledge and understanding of the other. In relation to more contemporary developments in the person-centered approach, an encounter group also offers the opportunity to relate and communicate at ‘relational depth’ (Mearns and Cooper, 2005, p. 36).

Encounter group participants meet with the aim of developing this type of communication, and with participants seeking an experience of connection and authenticity. There is a distinction between an encounter group and a therapy group, in that although an encounter group might be experienced as ‘therapeutic’, the participants do not come together for the purposes of seeking help, (Rose, 2008, p. 11). It may be a ‘closed’ group consisting of individuals who attend regularly over months or years, or a temporary group of ‘strangers’ who come together for the purpose of experiencing the group, for a day, or longer, (and who might number six or seven to over one hundred). The group may be facilitated by a person in this specific role, or self-facilitating. There is both an implicit and explicit acknowledgment that expressing oneself genuinely, and also hearing others accurately, without reacting from one’s own point of view, prejudices, or past hurts, is likely to be deeply challenging, and not always possible. For this reason, disagreement and conflict may occur, feelings may be hurt, communications may be ‘imperfect’ and there may be misunderstandings. Often through agreeing a group contract, based on the offered definition of encounter as genuine and deep communication, the group members commit to work through ‘difficult’ issues to the best of their ability. It has been my experience that, when an encounter group is able to work through these types of issues, through open and often bold communication, whilst simultaneously

valuing and supporting each person in the group, the outcome can be of deep learning about and acceptance of oneself and others. This is not the *goal* of the facilitator or group in the sense of aiming to direct towards this outcome; however, both facilitator and group members can hold the intent of learning from the experience.

The participant perspective: gentle space or stormy sea?

My interest in and love of being part of a group with the intent to relate deeply and the freedom to explore has led me to participate in a range of encounter groups over a period of several years. I take part in a self-facilitated bi-monthly encounter group, and I have participated in some large encounter groups of one hundred participants and more in the UK and Europe. My reasons for this are that as a person-centered therapist who teaches and supports counsellors /psychotherapists in training I have a deep interest in groups and how they work, and I gain much personally from encounter. Being in an encounter group allows me to experience myself in connection to and in communication with others and to explore that age-old question: who am I in relation to others? How can I express what is most personal to me and be available to hear others fully when they speak about their experience? It also allows me to develop my ability to attend to others.

I love the freedom I sometimes experience in encounter groups; the feeling of being open to what may develop; the way that, over a period of hours or days, the quality of communication in the group develops and changes, almost like a scent in the air, a textured, many faceted felt experience of being in a group which deepens in communication, sometimes imperceptibly. People sit silently at the beginning, sometimes nervous, fearful and uncertain; some express doubts about why they are there. Faces change over time, hardening and softening; fears, pain and dilemmas are expressed. I look at the faces around me at the end of a day, or days, and

see my fellow participants afresh; a new clarity in their eyes, a burden dropped. That wide inviting space in the centre of the room at once exciting and terrifying – what do I throw into it? What will come into it, at me? Do I dare to be myself here? I learn to love through encounter – others and myself. I have had moments of intense frustration and even hatred. I recall my intense anger with one fellow participant, who in the baking heat of summer, did not want to have the air conditioning on in what I felt was a stifling room. I was beside myself, dripping with sweat, convinced that this was unreasonable, that the ‘stifling room’ was a fact. Rogers (1961) highlights a corollary of congruence which he expresses as all feelings and meanings being communicated as perceptions from an internal frame of reference. In this sense, in my anger, I was incongruent in that moment. The ability of the group to hold the different feelings about and perspectives on this amazed me, and over the next few hours and days, I gradually came to understand the other person’s feelings about this as well as understanding more of my own response and anger.

I have had some of my most painful realisations in encounter groups and many of my breakthroughs. Each time I participate fills me with hope and optimism about the value and deep truths and power of the person-centered approach; that when people meet together with a commitment to being congruent which includes offering each other empathy and unconditional positive regard, change and growth can and does happen. If there is no one ‘officially’ in the role of facilitator (as in self facilitating groups), the group functions by different participants becoming facilitative and ‘holding’ the group at different times, filling me with confidence at our ability as humans to do this with each other. My experience in this fits with Rogers (1970) belief and trust that some group members will be facilitative and help to create safety.

However, I feel that the group becomes a ‘space’ that can feel both safe and dangerous. At times I have felt brave and bold, confident that I could say anything at all, and feel clear in

myself doing it. I also know that this is partly an illusion, as I have also experienced many times when I have felt the heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach which tells me that I really want to share part of myself within the group, but I am scared. The challenge, in my experience, is to be able to speak even though I may have doubts about my ability to articulate what I am feeling and thinking with accuracy, or when it does not feel totally 'safe'. 'Not feeling safe' for me means when I fear criticism, or I am exposing something I dislike about myself, or when I feel shame about an aspect of my experience or myself. Thus, 'taking a risk', is when I can take the step to speak anyway, to dive in, not knowing what I will find. Each time I do this, and discover afresh that indeed I can say anything and it might be met with empathy, or criticism, or incomprehension, I grow large and more into my humanity and shared humanity with others.

I do not mean to suggest that the encounter group is a cosy place. I have not always been completely understood or received in the groups I have been part of; however, I have discovered that there is always an interest from others and a willingness to hear me in some way, and sometimes to challenge me. What I discover as a consequence of this is the ability to speak anyway without fearing the reaction of others. I have a choice, between concealing aspects of myself, or revealing them, and in this tension, there is the potential for creativity and growth. I recall one time where I was sitting with a feeling of pain, sadness and discomfort, which I simply could not identify. I was able to say that I had a feeling which I could not express, and the care and patience of the other group members in tenderly allowing this 'don't know' feeling to slowly take shape and articulate itself will stay with me forever. Reflecting on this from a theoretical perspective, this could be seen as the quality of the attention of the group members (and the upholding of the necessary and sufficient conditions; Rogers, 1957, 1959) providing a climate in which I was able to shift from a 'felt sense' to symbolising my experience, (Gendlin, 1996).

The group also has the potential for enormous creativity. This, I suggest, is partly because it is possible within a group to experience different configurations of self (Mearns, 1999) as these emerge and are experienced in a group setting in a way that is different to a one to one encounter. The variety of interactions and relationships available in a group setting arguably offer the potential to explore not just the question ‘who am I?’ but ‘who am I in relation to this person?’, and ‘who in relation to that other person?’; ‘which parts of myself am I bringing to this encounter?’ I have often been challenged and confronted in ways which have been painful at the time, and which have led to growth. Equally, there are times in encounter groups when I have found it easier to challenge others than to express my own feelings, putting me in touch with the part of me who goes on the offensive (the ‘tiger me’). I am deeply grateful to those I have shared encounter groups with for allowing me to explore this part of myself whilst holding out their valuing and respect. The key to being able to develop self-knowledge and insight has been in my ability to reflect on my own process and that of the group. One metaphor for encounter groups that has meaning for me is of swimming and diving with others in a deep ocean of belonging and challenge, exploring the surface and the depths, sometimes finding undiscovered treasures, sometimes supporting others to swim, and at other times almost drowning. There are moments of calm and moments of terror.

When I am an encounter group participant, my focus is on my own process, and myself and also on others who are speaking to me and to each other. I aim to maintain an attitude of attention to myself and others whilst I choose what to share of myself and how, and aim to be helpful to others as far as I can in the moment. I also have an interest in the ‘dynamics’ of the group. However, I do not feel a responsibility or obligation to pay attention to each member of the group equally at all times, or to ensure that others are heard, or to notice every nuanced expression (although sometimes I may be able to do this). Therefore, in self-facilitating groups, there may be an increased risk that at times no one is maintaining attention.

Individuals and their responses, perhaps their distress at times, may be ‘missed’. This area of attention is where I believe that the role of the facilitator differs significantly from that of the participants. I will explore this idea in the next section.

Facilitating encounter: holding a candle

Within person-centered therapy training courses, participation in a personal development group as a method of learning about self and others remains common practice in many programmes and may offer the opportunity for participants to develop greater congruence (Mearns, 2003; Schmid, 2015). As one type of encounter group, the personal development group commonly meets consistently over a period of one to three years within a training programme. Larger programme-wide encounter groups also feature in some programmes. It is within this context that most of my own experience of facilitating encounter has taken place. As a facilitator of these groups, in the early stages I commonly witness the participants unsure of what they are ‘meant to be doing’, or what the intent of the group is, and searching for someone (often me as facilitator) to tell them. I have found that as we tolerate and stay with this uncertainty and frustration, some participants may take tentative steps. One person asks how others see them. Another reveals something that they find difficult in life. Yet another reveals the fear that others will not like them and is responded to with warmth. Moller and Rance (2013) in their study of trainees’ perceptions of such groups found that participants experienced both opportunities for personal growth and anxiety through their involvement, highlighting the potential role of the facilitator in creating a safe climate.

It has been suggested that the person-centered approach fails to propose a theory of groups and group dynamics to ‘shape the facilitator’s understanding or to help guide their actions’, (Hutchison, 2015, p.49), and that the person-centered facilitator relies on the core conditions to allow the group to develop constructively. Rogers (1970, p. 14) did indeed state that he did

not wish to 'build a high level abstract theory' of group processes and dynamics, preferring to write a 'naturalistic' account of his experience of patterns in groups. Hutchison (2015, p. 58) proposes a 'processing-oriented' understanding of groups, arguing that the group needs 'space' within which to symbolise what is happening between the members. It could therefore be argued that it is helpful if part of the group's agreement or commitment is to have time to process what is happening between the group members. Hutchison also (2015, p. 52) suggests that the processes of symbolising and processing experience which are fundamental to person-centered therapy, can become inhibited in a group context due to the complexity and intensity of being in a group and attempting to maintain contact with one's own experience whilst hearing the 'views and perspectives of others' (ibid). Thus, he considers that the task of the facilitator is to support the group members to be empathically understanding towards each other if a facilitative group climate is to be developed and maintained. In order for this to happen, he suggests that some degree of 'directivity' is needed in order to help group members to manage conflict and to intervene to support group cohesion. This raises the question of the extent to which a facilitator needs to be directive in order to support the group. Rogers writes of having 'no specific goal' (1971, p. 275) for the group, and indeed believed the facilitator's pursuit of goals to be non-facilitative (ibid. p. 279). Sanders (2012, p. 239) draws attention to this 'non-directive' attitude and distinguishes between being directive at the level of content and the level of process. Applying this to the role of the encounter group facilitator, it can be argued that the role includes the latter (for example by inviting the group's attention to what may be happening at certain moments) in order to potentially support participants in becoming more process orientated.

Rogers also stated (1971, p. 276) that he thought the group process to be more important than his statements or behaviours. This inspires me in moments of self-doubt when, reflecting on the group process, I (mistakenly) believe that I could have done something 'better' if only I

had made a 'grand statement' to clarify everything, or I fear that I am not 'doing it right'. These ego based fears obscure the real nature of facilitation, which is to offer the availability and openness of my 'presence' (Rogers, 1986, p. 198). I listen carefully, and I try to notice if someone is particularly distressed, gently enquiring about this. I see a distinction between being 'directive' and having a degree of responsibility as facilitator for the well-being and safety of the individuals in the group, seeing my role as being to 'hold' all the different experiences and perspectives expressed by members of the group equally, without giving more weight or importance or significance to any, and whilst upholding the attitudes and qualities of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence, both within myself and in what I bring to the group.

On safety, Rogers (1971, p. 266) writes:

'I wish very much to make the climate psychologically safe for the individual. I want him to feel from the first that if he risks saying something highly personal, or absurd, or hostile, or cynical, that at least one person in the circle respects him enough to hear him clearly and listen to that statement as his authentic expression.'

Here, perhaps, is a key to the difference between being a participant in an encounter group and a facilitator. As a participant I endeavour to hear others accurately and to respect them. However my attention is partly with myself, my own process and feelings, and I cannot give full attention to every group member one hundred per cent of the time. As facilitator, my attention is put to the service of the group, with my focus is simultaneously on the group as a whole and each individual within it. I do aim to hear each person fully and in doing so I become a holder of a 'candle' for the group, an image which for me means that my role is to assist in illuminating the dialogue, equally, for all, with as much constancy as I can. In contrast to being a participant, I am not there to 'develop myself' or to explore my own

feelings and responses directly, although I may express them at times, if I judge this to be congruent and facilitative. All of this I can only do to the best of my ability, and I continue to reflect on the times when I feel I may have misjudged my facilitative interventions and to learn from this.

This is the 'edge' where my experience of being a participant in encounter groups allows me to facilitate with greater awareness. Through being in encounter groups and hearing the stories and challenges of others, as well as being received by others, I feel that my 'intuition' has developed in such a way that I sense feelings and obscured meanings within the group simply through having become more sensitive to group process. I have expanded myself and my ability to work at depth, defined as a form of 'profound contact' and receptivity (Mearns and Cooper, 2005). Adamczyk (2018, p. 53) proposes this 'expansion of the self' as being significant in facilitating the ability to work in this way. Although it is also useful, my training in and knowledge of group dynamics pales into insignificance in comparison to this. After years of metaphorically paddling, diving and treading water in groups, I have a greater trust in myself. I know how to swim. The best way I can describe this is that the more I participate in encounter and the more I facilitate the more fearless I feel. By fearless, I do not mean a sense of recklessness, rather a trust that I can deal with anything that comes up and that nothing feels like a threat to me. I am prepared to be uncertain, to not know exactly what is going on, or what I am going to say next. Rogers (1986, p. 198) described the experience of being at his best as a group facilitator when 'I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me'. I have learned, through my own participation in groups, to be more in touch with this quality of the 'unknown', to stay with whatever is happening and to aim to remain fully present in the group whilst remaining in contact with whatever thoughts and feelings emerge in me. Each time I participate in or facilitate a group I continue to learn. As a consequence, I am able to take more risks in carefully voicing my intuition, I am more aware of how I feel in

the moment, and I can articulate it. As Rogers (1971, p. 277) puts it: 'I have learned to be more free in utilizing my own feelings as they exist in the moment'. In this, it is the quality of the 'unknown' that for me holds so much richness and potential.

Conclusion

Drawing from my experiences as both a participant and facilitator in encounter groups, I have proposed that a key to the difference between being a participant and a facilitator is the focus of attention of the facilitator. My ability to offer facilitation has been enriched through participation in encounter groups and having experienced the immense privilege of coming to have faith in the group process. Perhaps this is where the roles of facilitator and participants meet; that through encounter I have the opportunity to be more fully myself and to offer that self to others.

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(Word count 4178)

