A REVIEW ON MY JOURNEY AS A FACILITATOR IN BASIC ENCOUNTER GROUPS

Garima Gupta¹, Dr. K. M. Tripathi²
¹,²Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies
Faridabad, Haryana, India-121004

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to highlight my understanding of the encounter and the growth and challenges faced during the process. The key concepts of Rogerian three core criterions congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy were the structural foundation of the group formulation and development. This paper is a review about my journey as a facilitator and meta-reflector in Basic Encounter Groups (hereafter will be referred as BEG) in Delhi- NCR region, India. The open introspective process focuses on the development of self-actualization and resilience for self and others within the group.

Key Words: Person-Centered Therapy, Basic Encounter Groups, Facilitator, empathy, congruence

I. MY UNDERSTANDING OF BASIC ENCOUNTER GROUPS

In 1940’s, Carl Ransom Rogers, a pioneer humanistic psychologist, acknowledged the ‘Basic Encounter Groups’ or known as BEG. Each individual is unique and different in their own ways. Encounter means meeting others, who are innately different from self and unconditional expression of self hereby openness to others experiences (Proctor, 2019). The fundamental primary characteristics of the group therapy’s paradigm are based on the principles of Person-Centered therapy or PCT. The key premises are:

1. Self-actualization tendency of an individual is the affirming prime force and the foundation block of the PCT.
2. The client is its own finest expert and in complete charge of its life as a whole.
3. There are primary three core attributes of the therapist, namely, unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence, are the necessary and sufficient characteristics to facilitate a positive therapeutic climate of change. (Rogers, 1970)

Basic Encounter Groups fascinated me as a therapist owing to its principled non-directive and unstructured approach with a focus on self-growth. According to Rogers’s hypotheses, these groups are usually small in quantity (typically eight to eighteen members) and tend to have their own structure, direction and goals. There is no pre-conceived notion about the objectives and course of the group. I experienced that in these groups the facilitator and the participants, all are the part of the group. The principal focus is on the process rather than on the problem. There is a faith on the person and freedom of the expressions of thoughts and emotions without feeling arbitrated. The leader is enthused to develop a safe psychological climate where the clients can freely practice a sense of conviction and self-worth. This cohesive autonomy of expression with unconditional and constructive regard, initiates sinking of the defences of the clients. This accentuates a very high degree of freedom in the expressions of inner secret beliefs and sentiments, without feeling adjudicated. Only by the reflection of thoughts and feelings of clients, change occurs. There was absolutely no expected and projected outcome of the therapy throughout the process. There were no guidelines from Rogers (1970) so as to how to facilitate a group. He purposely avoided giving advices and believed in the spontaneity and individuality of a person. Consequently, the group flows in any direction. The whole focus of each member and the leader was on the process and journey towards becoming a fully functional being. In the end, the realisation of truly being self, is exhilarating. Total acceptance of one’s self is the key to self-actualization. Thus, there is observed a progressive change in the personal conduct and attitudes of the individual. As a result, the client accepts self – emotionally, physically and psychologically. The defence guard is now less rigid and flexible. Participants are
more congruent and aligned empathetically with self and others among the group. This sense of free will a more open and evolved group is observed. Here enhanced and open interpersonal and intrapersonal communication flows based on new ideas, new skills and new directions. Self-conceptualization and self-actualization persuades the client to move towards becoming a fully-functional person.

II. MY JOURNEY AS A FACILITATOR

Being a psychotherapist, I was always inspired by the architype and principles of Rogers’s Person-centered therapy. There were no rubrics, form or path. In all, it gave the sovereignty to the clients to be themselves and express their own feelings liberally. As I deep dived into the concepts of the Basic Encounter groups, encounters captivated me with their philosophy of faith and trust in the wisdom of the group and its members with no judgement and interference. I have been organizing encounter group as a co-facilitator since August 2019. Every encounter was a new experience in itself and an opportunity to meet others in a positive climate of growth and openness with an aim to understand and value each other. Being a facilitator pertains to commitment on my part to take on the responsibility of the group as a whole, not only the individual. I had to maintain a broader perspective unwary of my own emotional or physical biases. The dual role of the facilitator, as a coordinator and participant both, I believe is a difficult role to circumnavigate. I always felt requirement to be more liberated about expressing my own internal frame of thoughts, feelings and responses in the process. This nurture more acceptance of me being a participant in the group among other participants. Part of me was feeling excited and at the same time nervous too. Excited, because this was my first BEG experience as a facilitator within a group of complete eight strangers. It was like learning and achieving new skills. I felt nervous and anticipated as I was meeting every one for the first time in the group. All sorts of thoughts were running in my mind. A lot of questions such as, who are these people, how will I behave, will they open up, will I be myself, etc.? Without any structure and instructions how and which way all will develop? Will there be consistency in the group or will the group have no positive outcome? Will the group dynamics be positive and will I be capable enough to handle any sort of dominance or issues in the group? Will I be confident enough to resolve conflicts and confrontations in the group? Will I as a facilitator be unbiased and fully accepting? Will the group accept me as a part of the process? Will I refrain from advices and suggestions? How will I react when any of the members look up to me for a solution to their problems? More importantly, will I be able to share my inner fears without feeling judged? I realised that this journey is exhilarating as well as worrisome. I calmed myself and started on with the preparations of the session. Since the weather was nice, I thought to conduct this group in an open podium to let the breeze and nature alleviate up everyone. The chairs were arranged in a circle to have a contact of every member with the other. Water and basic amenities were adequately provided to make sure that everyone feels comfortable. Post lunch at 3 pm we started the three to four hour group session with all the members present. I noticed that initially everyone was quiet and nervous, looking around at each other. This made me realise that everyone is facing the same inhibitions as I.

As a facilitator, I initiated to break the ice by expressing my genuine feelings among the group. I shared about my feelings of excitement and apprehensiveness and expressed my gratitude for everyone for joining this journey. I also communicated that I am optimistic that mutually together we will be genuine and despite of the diverse geographical, racial, religious discriminations, we will discover the secret of being together. I, as a leader have no presupposition or pre-conceived notion about any member of the group. A group of complete strangers, sitting in the circle, trading complete truth and only truth is remarkable and courageous. I also assured about the autonomy to talk (or not to talk) is essentially their prerogative and choice. Complete confidentiality of the process and no videos or information will be shared anywhere without prior consents were reassured to all the group accomplices. Slowly and steadily, the group started opening up in the encouraging surroundings. Their emotional presence empowered the group. They acknowledged each other and with empathetic and genuine cues from the facilitator, they felt warmth and understood. All of us were awed by the unconditional and unprejudiced acceptance of the group. One of them had a past abusive relationship and this was affecting her present relationship to a degree that she could not decide whether to get married or not. Though she was very happy in her current relation but was scared to commit. The other member was a professional in UK and while shifting to Delhi has given up her work to take care of her family. Not that the family is complaining or bothering her, she herself feels emptiness inside. In mid-40’s she feels that she is losing her identity and worth. She had stopped feeling good and appreciating herself. Moreover, she feels that there is no point in even dressing up for this monotonous life. In the cluster, there was a mother-daughter duo. The mother was divorced and a teacher. She always felt that she is not good enough for her daughter and blames self for the financial and emotional instabilities in her daughter’s life. Had she been still in the abusive marriage, at least her daughter would not have faced problems. The daughter was bewildered and distressed when she came to knew about this. Initially,
she used to think that she is the reason that her mother had initially stayed in that marriage and later sacrificed marrying again and finding happiness. The daughter had even attempted to end up her life at times feeling guilty and regretting her existence. A 55 year old participant from Thailand was hesitant to share her experiences but seeing the group supporting each other psychologically and emotionally, she decided not to hold back all. She shared that being an orphan, how she chose to join a Convent and got training to become a teacher, the job she loved. Somehow, her performance declined and she was transferred to the administration department. All day long it was just paper work, while her colleague has been promoted as a Principal of one of the Convents. She had always dreamt of becoming a Principal one day. This infuriated her so much that without reviewing her own performance, she went to argue with the head of the Convent. She was suggested to go to retreats in India to learn Meditation and Vipassana. She felt discarded and dismissed and pitied self while blaming others. Another 25 year old female who always inspired to go abroad, shared her obstacles and how her family is non-supportive in pursuing her dreams. All her family wants her is to settle and marry someone they choose and take care of house, husband and children. Her dreams do not matter. Listening to the group, something encouraged the most silent member of the group to speak. She shared her journey of getting married early in a joint family according to her parent’s wishes. She was programmed to behave in a certain manner and seek pleasure in the mundane household chores. Now with the children grown up and busy in their lives she was confused and scared whenever she thought about herself. She had always nurtured a low self-esteem and now when she wants to pursue her studies, she is either ignored or laughed at by the family. It hurts her that her husband and kids also belittle her that why does she wants to study at 55 years of age and what will she do after that. She has lot of pent up emotions and frustrations welling deep inside her.

As a facilitator, I was awed by the splendour of this group. I also was encouraged to give and receive openly in the process. The flow of these reflective and meditative thoughts made me appreciate the exquisiteness of inner self of a human being when they are in a safe psychological climate setting. The non-possessive warmth in the group stimulated a channel for everyone, including me, to let go of their guards. Being one’s own self is a magnificent as well as at times frightening experience. I could unleash the demons inside me and that made me comfortable in facing them. I accepted and recognized everyone as they are. At times, I was tempted to respond spontaneously and too quickly without leaving space for others to communicate. This impatience and over eagerness is a constant challenge that I face in encounter settings. My motive became to rein my innermost feelings and internalize before reacting. This helped me maintain a positive and curious attitude towards my group. I realized that when I function in terms of my own internal feelings, I become more free with respect to the group or self. I leave the prejudices and anxieties and tend to live in now. I grow as a whole. I unselfconsciously expressed myself and the group perceived me as a part and accepted me. Simultaneously, I was also more accepting and became fully aware of my own faulty beliefs. I was emotionally and personally participating in the group. My experience of each group and within the group was every time new. The group evolved and every person felt the change. Each individual confronted self and gave a feedback of feeling bonded and trusting self to feel strong and self-motivated. I, on the other hand, motivated and determined, embarked on this journey of healing self and facilitating others. Every group is a different and new experience and I realized that a change becomes a change when it happens within you first. In this decade of communication through social media, many individuals still seek and treasure connections (Haley & Yates, 2019). After each encounter I always wonder that not only we all survived the difficult and challenges moments in the process, we emerged as stronger and more compassionate individuals.

REFERENCES