

For seminar use  
only

Bold by

(15)

Kjell Eric Rudestam

in: *Experiential Groups in  
Theory and Practice*

9

Brooks Cole Publ. Comp.  
Monterey, California 1982

## Theme-Centered Interaction

Theme-centered interaction (TCI) is a relatively new addition to the group movement and may not be as well known as some of the approaches so far discussed. The method is rapidly increasing in popularity, however, due in large part to the energy and influence of its creator, Ruth Cohn, a German-born experiential psychoanalyst and group psychotherapist. The theme-centered interactional group belongs within the humanistic tradition together with other process groups such as sensitivity groups and Rogerian encounter groups, yet has mainly been shaped by the philosophical background and psychodynamic training of its originator. The method's unique quality is its focus on a theme that structures the events of the group and around which interactional processes and its explicit philosophical basis can be explored. The approach has been referred to as "an experiential method (integrating educational, group-dynamic, and therapeutic features) which may be adapted to group needs, problem solving, and a variety of themes" (Gordon, 1972, p. 104).

### HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT

The history of the theme-centered interactional method reveals many of its distinguishing features. Ruth Cohn was a practicing psychoanalyst when she emigrated to the United States in 1941. She had been trained at the Zurich Psychoanalytic Institute and brought her practice in individual and group psychoanalysis to New York City. While supervising and training psychoanalysts in the 1950s she offered countertransference workshops to acquaint budding and experienced therapists with aspects of their own

personality dynamics that might distort their perception of patients and interfere with their effectiveness in conducting therapy. In her typically self-disclosing way, Cohn asked her student group to remain silent while she free-associated to a case with which she was having difficulty. While listening, the group learned a great deal about their leader as well as her patient. They also related their own feelings, thoughts, and backgrounds to the case. With Cohn functioning as a participant/leader, a highly charged group atmosphere was created. As students began to present cases of their own and relate them to aspects of their own lives, the countertransference theme came alive. It became clear to the therapists that they were unconsciously repeating the same conflicts and interactional behaviors in the workshop that they experienced with their patients in therapy. Indeed, many times they "acted out" their patients in the group and the group became "the therapist." The group sessions were used to identify and dissolve this interference to effective therapy (called countertransference).<sup>1</sup> For example, one participant rationalized the rebelliousness of a patient who failed to pay his fees. He was shown that his own behavior in breaking a rule of silence during case presentations in the countertransference group was similar to the defiant behavior of his nonpaying patient and elicited a response from the group similar to the one his client elicited from him.

Although this supervision group was designed to be an educational workshop, its greater value was in the therapy it provided for its members. Rather than dismissing group incidents as interference with the workshop goal, Cohn's psychoanalytic training inspired her to "go with the resistance" and give precedence to events that appeared to be distracting the group from its purpose. She realized that these group interactions could be used profitably to elaborate the countertransference theme. In effect, students' therapy problems were related to developmental and personality issues within the students themselves. As group leader, Cohn tried to balance the group work between the theme itself and the ongoing interactions of the participants. She facilitated the group process by identifying points of contact between the countertransference issues of the individual and the events within the group that illustrated them.

Countertransference is a psychoanalytic concept particularly amenable to a theme-centered format. However, Cohn began to explore the viability of using other themes to bridge the distance between group process and group goals and concerns. By 1962, seven years after the first countertransference workshop, she was applying the technique for other purposes. In one case, employees in a large industrial organization met to discuss problems within the company's administration. As the group

<sup>1</sup>While "countertransference" is an accepted phenomenon today in all discussions of psychotherapy—it was at the time of the "countertransference" workshop labeled as a weakness of the therapist that needed to be "analyzed." It was in the open disclosure of countertransference as a fact of any therapist's life that this workshop became a guiding force in the experiential movement.

tackled conflicts in ment relations instance. "Train psychologists (C which important increasingly cle

Although th the applicability origin in educati long been intrig therapy groups' function of the T into interaction psychologically ally the case, as apy and encour interactional me an organization therapists, busin workshops for p: the United State

## BASIC CONC

### *Living/learn*

Ruth Cohn l to fashion the th of herself in the , humanistic tradi than from psych illustrates this p Lieberman at the meant to empha ters can all prov people communi are in a living/lea that goes on in r and opinions to : tional group aim therapeutic outc than a medical-c Buttrressing i accepted and up

- Human be cosmos. I

no  
rather:  
same value

tackled conflicts and issues within the organization, problems in management relations came vividly to life within the group itself. In another instance, "Training in Emotional Skill" was used as a theme for a group of psychologists (Cohn, 1969). The power of a theme to act as a pivot around which important individual and group learning could turn became increasingly clear.

Although there has been a great deal of experimentation to broaden the applicability of a theme-centered approach to groups, TCI had its origin in education and retains a strong educational thrust. Ruth Cohn had long been intrigued by the contrast of the zestful, alive quality of many therapy groups with the languid, dull quality of so many classrooms. One function of the TCI movement has been to get teachers off the podium and into interaction with their students. As we shall see, TCI offers a more psychologically sophisticated approach to classroom learning than is usually the case, as well as a more structured approach to group psychotherapy and encounter. The main vehicle for teaching the theme-centered interactional method is the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning (WILL), an organization founded by Cohn in 1966. Today WILL trains teachers, therapists, business people and other group leaders in TCI and offers workshops for professionals and the public in major metropolitan areas in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

## BASIC CONCEPTS

### *Living/learning*

Ruth Cohn had to grow beyond her own psychoanalytic roots in order to fashion the theme-centered interactional approach and reveal so much of herself in the group. In truth, the method has borrowed more from the humanistic tradition and the existential principles of Western philosophy than from psychoanalytic theory (Rubin, 1978). The *living/learning* concept illustrates this philosophical heritage. The term was coined by Norman Lieberman at the time of the founding of WILL in 1966 (Cohn, 1971). It is meant to emphasize the fact that education, psychotherapy, and encounters can all provide people with a live learning experience. When lively people communicate with one another about issues, tasks, or themes, they are in a living/learning situation. This is in contrast to the "dead" learning that goes on in many classrooms, where a teacher spoonfeeds both facts and opinions to a passive, receptive student. The theme-centered interactional group aims to promote learning as a living experience, so that the therapeutic outcomes derive from an educational-growth model rather than a medical-cure model.

Buttressing the living/learning concept are three humanistic axioms accepted and upheld by theme-centered leaders (Ronall & Wilson, 1980):

- Human beings are discrete psychobiological units within a unified cosmos. In other words, all people are acknowledged to be simul-

taneously autonomous and interdependent. Group members are encouraged to value their differences from one another together with their needs for mutual feedback and nourishment.

- Life and growth, and decisions that encourage their unfolding deserve respect. Forces that promote this respect are seen as humane; forces that do not promote this respect are seen as inhumane. Within the group there is freedom for exploration, experimentation, interaction, acceptance of emotions, and open communication.
- Free decision-making is bounded by internal and external limits. At the same time, these boundaries are flexible and expandable. Group members are recognized to possess more behavioral freedom than they probably ever use and by the same token to be restricted in their behavior by virtue of reality constraints within the group and in the world at large.

#### *Transference and countertransference*

The psychoanalytic concepts of *transference* and *countertransference* are endemic to the TCI group. One definition of transference is "the process in which a person projects a pattern of adaptation which was learned, developed and adopted in a previous life situation to a current life situation; he then displaces the affect from that situation to the present situation" (Demarest & Teicher, 1978). Transference occurs in a group when members displace feelings that belong elsewhere onto another member or the leader. Typically, transference takes place when a participant behaves toward another member or the leader as if that person were someone else in the participant's life. The significant other might be a parent or spouse, a lover or a teacher—usually a figure from the distant past. The chosen group member might be someone whose physical characteristics or group behavior is unconsciously reminiscent of the significant other. Thus, members respond to one another on the basis of both here-and-now behaviors and unconscious needs. They may even distort each other's comments and attempt to push one another into specific roles for transference reasons.

The interpretation of transference is a crucial aspect of psychoanalytically-oriented groups. At one extreme there are practitioners who merely do individual psychoanalytic therapy within the group setting, by attending to unconscious processes through exploring free associations, dreams, and resistances, focusing on intrapsychic processes, and analyzing transference phenomena. The virtue of the group setting for most psychoanalytically-oriented leaders, however, is that it allows for multiple interactions. We have already seen how the presence of other persons can provide a vehicle for encouragement and support. Likewise, transferences and reactions to them are multiplied in groups because of the potential for so many different kinds of relationships. In analytic group therapy, activating these transferences is critical to the regressive process, in which intense expressions of emotion and an exploration of childhood and the

past are used to find meaning (Baum, 1978).

At the other extreme, some therapists who use the Tavistock group model, or stock groups, emphasize the development of group themes as a way of interacting with the client's needs.

Theme-centered work focuses on the client's reactions to historical needs, and on the group, rather than on the client's chart a course by themselves. The therapist recognizes the work and attributes attitudes that fall short of expectations to the person's past history.

In some TCI groups, transference, manifested as a response to the therapist, provides clues to the person's unconscious. Unreasoning distortions, overemotional and defensive, and overly sympathetic reactions to members (transference) are seen on the theme of

#### *The theme*

The use of a theme in a group. It is the central focus of the group. It provides a function and agenda. The group selects a theme to increase cohesiveness. Group members become free within the limited to TCI groups. They discovered a way for individuals to be active and actions.

The selection of themes in groups are said to function better than individual therapy. They are concerned with the client's history and invited to a group

past are used to foster reconstructive personality change (Mullan & Rosenbaum, 1978).

At the other extreme are some psychoanalytically-oriented group therapists who combine group dynamics with group psychoanalysis. The Tavistock group, described in Chapter 2, illustrates this approach. Tavistock groups ignore individual transference that interferes with the development of group relationships and communication, but interpret group themes and the group structure that develops out of all members' interacting needs.

Theme-centered interactional group leaders recognize that participants' reactions to one another are based both on present behaviors and historical needs. As individual members try to impose their own influence on the group, certain tensions among them inevitably emerge. TCI leaders chart a course between two psychological realities. On the one hand, they recognize the way participants can distort group events and incorrectly attribute attitudes and motives to other members. On the other hand, they fall short of exploring the ultimate origins of any given behavior in a person's past history unless it relates directly to the chosen group theme.

In some TCI groups the issue of transference, or its parallel, countertransference, may serve as a theme. Countertransference is a leader's response to the unrealistic attitudes and expectations of group members. Clues to the presence of countertransference include: premature and unreasoning dislike for participants; an inability to empathize with them; an overemotional reaction to their troubles; an excessive liking for them; and defensive, argumentative, indifferent, inattentive, impatient, and angrily sympathetic feelings and behaviors in response to them (Cohen, 1952). These reactions apply to both group leaders (countertransference) and members (transference) and may indicate an opportunity for useful work on the theme of unrealistic attitudes and reactions.

#### *The theme*

The use of a *theme* is the primary distinguishing feature of the TCI group. It is the centerpiece around which the group performs. The theme provides a functional structure for the group without a preconceived agenda. The group leader, a delegated committee, or the group as a whole selects a theme as the focus for the group and as a way to encourage cohesiveness. Group members work on the theme or task while also becoming free with each other. Use of the word "theme" is certainly not limited to TCI groups, but the theme-centered interactional method has discovered a way of packaging a theme and resolving tasks while allowing individuals to become more aware and effectual in their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The selection and wording of an appropriate theme is crucial. Therapy groups are said to have one (implicit) theme only: "I want to feel and function better" (Cohn, 1971). Working groups, on the other hand, might be concerned with many other themes. When a group leader initiates or is invited to a group or workshop without a clear understanding of the

members' particular issues and concerns, the theme will reflect an assessment of their needs, such as "Sharing My Expectations With You" or "Finding My Wants and Sharing Them," or any formulation congenial to the group members' verbal styles.

Lieberman (Gordon, 1972) has divided themes into five groups:

- *Exploring* themes help participants develop interpersonal relationships and discover new interests. Participants relate to themes that are personally relevant. An example from a growth group might be "Getting to Know You, Letting You Know Me." A theme for a skills group would be "Discovering What I Do Best."
- *Expediting* themes aim to clarify dilemmas and impasses and provide a readiness for getting to work. An example is "Getting Things Done with You."
- *Experiencing* themes emphasize awareness in the here-and-now and are typically used with school, community, club, or family groups, which are already established. Representative themes include "Being Me and Relating to You" and "Finding Autonomy and Interdependence."
- *Experimenting* themes focus on increasing efficiency, playing with new and different ideas for overcoming persistent problems, and moving forward creatively. "Finding New Ways of Teaching Mathematics," "Finding New Ways of Contacting My Kids," and "Taking Risks with You Here-and-Now" are examples.
- *Evaluating* themes are used to help participants survey their lives and take stock of their accomplishments with an eye to future goals. Sample themes include "Experiencing Myself at Home (in My Community, at School, at Work)" and "Where I've Come From and Where I'm Going."

There is no limit to the number of conceivable themes for a group, but the wording is important. The statement of themes must be personal, positive, engaging, and open-ended. The use of gerunds in the theme reflects growth and movement. A theme is not a topic, such as "Juvenile Delinquency." Nor is it an agenda such as one might have in a business meeting. Positive wording, such as "Bridging My Loneliness," is more effective for therapeutic outcomes than negative wording, such as "Being Lonely." Themes awaken feelings and interests among the group members and help create a living/learning atmosphere by hooking into each participant's personal responses to an issue or task.

#### *Dynamic balancing*

Cohn (1970) offers the following description of the TCI group.

The Theme-Centered Interactional Workshop can be graphically seen as a triangle in a globe. The *triangle* presents the workshop setting, which is organized in awareness of dealing with the three basic factors of all interac-

tional groups designates the triangle, make-up takes place. In addition to the triangle, the group keeps the "globe" as a visualizer of the "We" as the infinite c

The importance of the triangle in groups in general emphasizes on the dynamics. How deliberate enunciation has been mentioned is the notion that they are part of themselves. The personal experience We point refers to the group has a

*Dynamic balancing*  
I-We-It triangle v  
Groups that stress affective experience. Concentrating participants feel encouraged. In classroom groups or being mainly cooperative production quot activities. Their lack of attention

tional groups: 1) The individual: I, 2) the group: We, 3) the theme: It. The *globe* designates the environment in which the workshop takes place: time, location, make-up of the group and the auspices under which the workshop series takes place. The Theme-Centered Interactional Method gives equal importance to the three basic points of the triangle and their relationships, and keeps the "globe" in mind. The richness of this simple structure is evident if one visualizes the complicated structure of the "I" as a psychobiological unit, of the "We" as the interrelatedness of the group's members, and the theme as the infinite combination of concrete and abstract factors [Cohn, 1970, p. 24].

The important aspects of group functioning, described by the points of the triangle in Figure 9-1, are present in all groups. We have seen that groups in general can be distributed on a scale that reflects their relative emphasis on the "I," or individual member, versus the "We," or group dynamics. However, one of the unique qualities of TCI groups is the deliberate enunciation of these constructs and their interaction. It has been mentioned that one of the cardinal axioms or "givens" of TCI groups is the notion that human beings are both autonomous and interdependent. They are part of a larger universe as well as unique and responsible to themselves. The *I* point of the triangle reflects the autonomous dimension, the personal experience of each group member at any point in time. The *We* point refers to the interdependency of people and the observation that the group has a "we-ness" or life of its own.



Figure 9-1. Triangle in the globe

*Dynamic balancing* is the process of trying to integrate the points of the I-We-It triangle within the group environment. It is a core concept in TCI. Groups that stress exclusively the I and We areas tend to be very emotional, affective experiences. Encounter groups are good examples of this emphasis. Concentration on the I and the We leads to concern about which participants feel scared or angry, and the sharing of such feelings is encouraged. In contrast to this "process" orientation, business and classroom groups or meetings with prepared agendas stress the It aspect by being mainly content-oriented. They stay with the It of working out production quotas, teaching curricula, ordering textbooks, or planning activities. Their effectiveness or lack of it is oftentimes dependent on their lack of attention to intrapsychic and interpersonal dynamics. A jealous

member of an organization can hang up the group's process indefinitely; one angry teacher (or rebellious student) can thwart a carefully crafted program for an entire school.

According to TCI practitioners the I is most fruitfully explored and developed when group interactions take place around a theme since participants tend to pursue the theme in their own idiosyncratic ways. A TCI approach to teaching a college class on the topic of biological stress illustrates the living intersection of the points of the I-We-It triangle (Langler, 1973). In designing an approach to the subject the author spent some time considering the expectations for the course (It), his own expectations (I), and where the students might be (We). The theme "Experiencing and Understanding Biological Stress" was chosen as a way to integrate research findings on biological stress with students' personal experiences of the topic. The following introduction to the students provides them with an intellectual issue while requiring them to refer to their past experience and moving them to the here-and-now:

Our topic today is "Experiencing and Understanding Biological Stress." As I think about biological stress, I recognize that when I feel I'm under stress various physical manifestations express themselves as tension, a headache, a general feeling of not well being. It also seems that I can correlate the colds I get with periods of stress. I also think that the death of people I've known in some instances could have been attributed in part to stress. What I would like you to do this morning is to think about what the words biological stress mean to you, moments in your own life when you felt you were under stress and what the physical manifestations might have been, or people you've known whose death you might in some part attribute to stress. It might also be interesting for you to share with the group whether you are feeling under any kind of stress now and what that feeling is. Finally I'd like all of us to ask what might account for these various things, particularly focusing on the nervous and endocrine systems [Langler, 1973, p. 2].<sup>2</sup>

The subsequent group discussion drew on the students' own impressions of biological stress and integrated their observations with the professor's contributions on the physiology of stress.

The group loses its balance and effectiveness when one point of the triangle predominates at the expense of the others. Take the example of a participant who goes into great detail in sharing her marital difficulties while exploring the theme "Handling My Anger Effectively." Other members might respond loudly to her and turn the group into a shouting match, providing a living example of the theme. Likewise, others might join with her and tie her experiences to their own thoughts and feelings. The group might also list viable options to handling anger inappropriately. In all of these cases, there is the possibility of positively converting whatever happens into further growth and learning. Members see how they handle anger elicited by one participant's domination of the group. The leader's

<sup>2</sup>From *Biology Unit on Biological Stress Taught Using the WILL Method*, by G. Langler. Unpublished manuscript, 1973. Oberlin College. Reprinted by the permission of the author.

role is to p  
for the me  
these func

The g  
which the  
of the grou  
also inclu  
tions" of t  
the day af  
that dram  
bring to th  
about disc  
impatien  
are all pa  
globe con  
that all fa

Globe  
can be en  
ally to faci  
to an age  
another, I  
Galinsky,  
understar  
unfortuna  
ric clinic  
tion to th

#### BASIC

They  
leaders di  
the meth  
addition  
there is a  
sometime  
philosopl  
humanist  
a group (l

#### Post

Two  
stressing  
you are y  
though a  
that they  
Chairper:



role is to preserve the group's dynamic balance and illuminate the process for the members. The leader's ultimate goal is the gradual assumption of these functions by the group.

The globe in which the triangle is placed refers to the environment in which the group functions. This includes time, place, and avowed purpose of the group, and the factors that led to its inception. More subtly, the globe also includes the "values and influences" and "political/historical situations" of the environment (Ronall & Wilson, 1980). Thus, a group meeting the day after the assassination of a political leader would be influenced by that dramatic event. More commonly, the feeling that group members bring to the group—unacknowledged relief at getting out of work, curiosity about discovering the "truth" about Jack, anger at being coerced to attend, impatience to meet one's spouse's demand to be home early to babysit—are all part of the various "globes" of the group members. In theory, the globe concept is based on the action that the universe is indivisible and that all factors in the world are interdependent with all others.

Globe factors need to be referred to by the leader so that participants can be encouraged to share relevant resistances and clear the air emotionally to facilitate effective group functioning. When the leader is an outsider to an agency where the group members might be very familiar with one another, this is a globe factor apt to be especially significant (Shaffer & Galinsky, 1974). A sharp leader will research the situation and try to gain an understanding for the rationale of the group prior to entering. In one unfortunate case, Cohn offered a workshop on staff relations at a psychiatric clinic and found on her arrival that staff members who were in opposition to the medical director had not bothered to attend!

#### BASIC PROCEDURES

There is considerable variability in the techniques that TCI group leaders draw upon, based on life experience, training, and familiarity with the methods of encounter, Gestalt, psychodrama, and other therapies. In addition to employing techniques that overlap with other kinds of groups, there is a structured system of group-leading peculiar to TCI groups. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the methods and the guiding philosophy of TCI, since the guidelines of the process are seen as basic humanistic concerns and phenomena rather than as rules for conducting a group (Rubin, 1978).

#### Postulates

Two postulates flow directly from the underlying humanistic axioms stressing the twin needs for freedom and relationship. The first postulate is *you are your own chairperson*. This postulate stresses the fundamental, though always limited, autonomy of group members with the reminder that they are responsible for their own actions and decisions in the group. Chairpersons make themselves aware of their own needs and goals, as well

process indefinitely;  
t a carefully crafted

itfully explored and  
und a theme since  
idiosyncratic ways. A  
c of biological stress  
the I-We-It triangle  
ect the author spent  
(It), his own expecta-  
tation "Experiencing  
s a way to integrate  
ersonal experiences  
s provides them with  
he' past experience

B: "Magical Stress." As I  
... I'm under stress  
tension, a headache, a  
n correlate the colds I  
f people I've known in  
ress. What I would like  
biological stress mean  
vere under stress and  
people you've known  
ress. It might also be  
are feeling under any  
ce all of us to ask what  
using on the nervous

ts' own impressions  
vi' the professor's

en one point of the  
ke a example of a  
marital difficulties  
Effectively." Other  
oup into a shouting  
e, others might join  
is and feelings. The  
inappropriately. In  
onverting whatever  
e how they handle  
group. The leader's

Method, by G. Langer.  
omission of the author.

as their perceptions of the realities of other people and circumstances—and act to satisfy and realize them while considering everyone involved. Leaders encourage participants to take responsibility for themselves in the group. They are urged to give and get what they want to give and get in the session and in their lives. If a participant wishes to remain silent, the leader merely attempts to help the member make that choice a conscious and enlightened one. Chairpersons may need the reminder that they are responsible for their actions and decisions, especially those that influence other people's lives. The postulate of being your own chairperson is not a rule that is arbitrarily forced on the group but an existential truth that is not within the power of any person to deny. Since people so often give up their power and wait for permission from others, this postulate helps encourage active awareness of each person's responsibility for giving and getting in the group.

The leader is governed by the same tenet. In fact, the postulate helps to remove the onus of authoritarianism from the leader and encourages members to expand their possibilities and choices themselves. "Being your own chairperson" is very different from "doing your own thing." Self-centered behavior has a detrimental impact on the other members and on the group process, whereas being one's own chairperson acknowledges an awareness of internal and external factors and of responsibility for actions and their consequences.

The second basic postulate of TCI groups is that *disturbances take precedence*. Within a group's life there are times that individuals may not be fully present and involved because of emotional interference. A disturbance is any thought or feeling that detracts from the individual's full presence in the group. It may be an external event, such as being demoted at work or having an argument with one's spouse, or it may be an interpersonal issue within the group, such as unfinished emotional business between two members. Disturbances may also be positive events, such as a promotion or a love affair. In any case, personal interference takes priority and is identified and handled by the involved individual. Disturbances of a group may sometimes have to take precedence over those of a person. In a task-oriented group, for example, the external situation may demand speedy action beyond an individual reaction. The discussion of personal issues might then have to be postponed.

The leader's role is to encourage group members to handle any disturbances so that they can be resolved sufficiently to allow the individual to attend to the present and the group to proceed. Because the postulate is often stated as a ground rule before the group begins, group members are expected and encouraged to disclose disturbances on their own. A sensitive leader, however, will be aware that a group member is upset or distracted and will assist that person in dealing with the disturbance.

Disturbances are particularly apparent when the group does not have a sensitivity or psychotherapy theme, such as a work group within an

education  
asked to de  
ics entitled  
women app  
interrupted  
the lecture  
they had li  
stimulated  
the group ;

The pt  
bring parti  
themselves  
share their  
member m  
issue. Tech  
exercise of  
(Shaffer & C  
with the di

Disturb  
parent grou  
session the  
absence. A  
bridge to a  
cent going  
Such is the

#### Comm

A num  
aid in the ir  
1978). Thes  
pants at th  
guidelines

1. Spea  
singular to  
opinions o  
tend to be  
without ver  
urged to cl  
attitudes at

2. Mak  
informatio  
often disgu  
program w  
work). Aski  
whereas m.

educational or organizational setting. For example, Ruth Cohn (1971) was asked to demonstrate TCI procedures in an academic seminar on economics entitled "Stock Market and Money Market." When she noticed that two women appeared to be daydreaming instead of listening to the lecture, she interrupted the seminar and asked the women to share their views about the lecture with each other within the group. The women admitted that they had little interest and no expertise in the subject. This admission stimulated a lively exchange that brought the women back into the flow of the group and the group back to the women.

The purpose of dealing with disturbances as they occur is simply to bring participants back to a point where they can once again involve themselves fully in the group. Often it is sufficient for members merely to share their concerns or upsets with the group. At other times, however, the member may be upset enough to warrant therapeutic work around the issue. Techniques borrowed from other perspectives, such as the Gestalt exercise of making the rounds, are useful tools to resolve disturbances (Shaffer & Galinsky, 1974). The leader keeps in mind, however, that those with the disturbance will return to the theme as soon as they are able.

Disturbances usually relate to the theme. Imagine, for example, a parent group on the theme "Meeting the Challenge of Change." During one session the coleader is missing and one member is upset because of his absence. As the member talks about her feelings, the issue becomes a bridge to a discussion on meeting a new challenge created by an adolescent going away to school and stepping out of the group member's life. Such is the power of the theme.

#### *Communication ground rules*

A number of ground rules of communication have been suggested to aid in the implementation of the two basic postulates in TCI groups (Rubin, 1978). These *auxiliary rules* are not necessarily presented to the participants at the outset of the group, but are frequently used as reminders or guidelines by the leader to enhance group functioning.

1. *Speak for I.* Participants are encouraged to speak in the first person singular to emphasize that individuals are personally responsible for their opinions or feelings. "We," "everybody," and the indefinite plural "you" tend to be used to avoid potential disagreement or to suggest agreement without verification. By staying with the first person singular, members are urged to check out the views of others and to avoid projecting their own attitudes and feelings onto them.

2. *Make the statement behind the question.* Questions are reserved for information-seeking. Gestalt therapists have pointed out that questions often disguise hidden statements (for example, "Do you really think this program will work?" might disguise the opinion that the program won't work). Asking a question often involves very little disclosure and risk, whereas making a personal statement suggests authentic communication

and helps develop self-awareness. TCI participants are encouraged to at least state their own views prior to asking questions.

3. *Hold off making personal interpretations of others as long as possible.* At their best, interpretations of others' behaviors are a gift of insight. More often they put people on the defensive.

4. *Avoid generalizations.* Generalizations change the direction of the group process. This may or may not be desirable. Group members are urged to stay concrete and specific. Judicious use of generalizations can be helpful in bridging the way from topic to topic.

5. *Acknowledge the subjectivity of your perceptions of others.* Group members are reminded that their opinions of others are only that, opinions, and that no one has a monopoly on the truth. Group members are encouraged to admit that their perceptions are biased and to share what they mean with one another. In this way, scapegoating is avoided and personal attacks are discouraged.

6. *Side conversations are important.* In the same way that disturbances take precedence, so may side conversations between two or more group members. Side conversations are often rich in relevant group material, and they may reflect the inhibitions or hostilities of members. The leader will gently invite members to share side conversations with the group, and the participants then decide whether they wish to do so.

7. *Speak one at a time.* Obviously, when two or more members speak at the same time, the group loses cohesion and gains confusion. Members are encouraged to speak in turn.

8. *When two or more people want to speak at the same time, let them resolve the issue.* The persons wishing to speak are each encouraged to briefly share with one another their concern for instant relief. A decision on the order of speaking is then resolved on the basis of the ensuing discussion. The involved members, not the leader, make this decision.

9. *Be selectively authentic in communicating.* Communications are to be both authentic and selective: authentic in the sense of being genuine and sincere; selective in the sense that not everything on a group member's mind can be nor should be shared. Members are encouraged to be aware of their thoughts and feelings and attentively choose what they say and do. As their own chairpersons, they determine what to share with the group with the assurance of still being authentic without bowing to group pressure.

Selective authenticity is also a value for group leaders. They, perhaps more than anyone, must integrate their own needs for giving and receiving with their leadership function. The leader often has to stay with comments that will enhance the group's interaction. A leader's disclosure of anger toward a group member might or might not be appropriate. With regard to leader authenticity, "To give less than needed is theft; to give more is murder" (Cohn, 1971, p. 270). If the participant could actually benefit in self-understanding beyond feeling deprecation, such sharing might be useful. This might especially be the case when feelings of anger are shared

by many other  
Since disturbar  
become distract  
participant-pres  
necessary; a lea  
as relationships  
shares her own  
ing Skills" or he  
group.

#### *Beginning 1*

The leader's  
structured than  
apparent than ir  
might begin an  
Ruth Cohn mak  
mood. She atten  
and concurrentl  
Her favorite ope  
nique" (Cohn, 19  
first, group men  
instructed to tu  
collect any thoug  
they first decida  
tion, the leader c  
with open eyes  
moment. This is  
sensations relate  
and the globe. Th  
leader, that atten  
each participant  
to look at the gr  
enhance their w  
Take."

At the end o  
leader gently inv  
feelings generate  
group are inform  
instance, that the  
for getting from a  
bances to the the  
and other distract  
dealt with.

Cohn likes t  
members to conc  
or task instructio

by many other members. In any case, timing and sensitivity predominate. Since disturbances take precedence there might be times when leaders become distracted and need to share that material to preserve their participant-presence in the group. Authenticity around the group theme is necessary; a leader's selectivity may decrease during the course of a group as relationships become stronger. An example would be the leader who shares her own teaching experiences in a group on "Improving My Teaching Skills" or her work with a particular patient in a countertransference group.

#### *Beginning the group*

The leader's function at the beginning of the TCI group is more structured than in many other groups, and nowhere is this structure more apparent than in the opening session. In the same way that William Schutz might begin an encounter group with a nonverbal, energizing exercise, Ruth Cohn makes an effort to establish an involved, but nonthreatening mood. She attempts to reduce anxiety, create a constructive group climate, and concurrently orient the participants toward thinking about the theme. Her favorite opening in early days was known as the "triple-silence technique" (Cohn, 1969). There are usually three periods of silence. During the first, group members are invited to sit quietly, with eyes closed. They are instructed to tune into themselves, focus on the "I" of the triangle, and collect any thoughts or feelings about the theme's relevance for them when they first decided to attend the group. After a few minutes of silent reflection, the leader offers a second suggestion, namely to return to the group with open eyes and experience what it is like to be in the group at that moment. This is a here-and-now step, focusing on personal feelings and sensations related to other group participants, the We part of the triangle and the globe. The third silence involves a task, prepared in advance by the leader, that attempts to pull together the I, We, and It dimensions, so that each participant has a mental TCI experience. Participants might be asked to look at the group and select one group member they believe might enhance their work in a workshop with the theme "Learning to Give and Take."

At the end of the triple-silence period, group interaction begins. The leader gently invites the participants to share as many thoughts and feelings generated by the techniques as they wish. The ground rules for the group are informally related at this time. Members are reminded, for instance, that they are their own chairpersons and must take responsibility for getting from and giving to the group what they wish; and that disturbances to the theme take precedence, so that feelings of boredom, anger, and other distractions from complete participation can emerge and be dealt with.

Cohn likes the use of meditative silence in groups to encourage members to concentrate on thoughts about the theme, being in the group, or task instructions. She cautions, however, that the triple-silence tech-

nique may be too threatening as an opener with a group in which an inordinate amount of anxiety or defensiveness can be anticipated. In such cases, silence may actually increase the anxiety level. Consequently, groups that have been coerced into attending a workshop, for instance, may benefit from a different kind of opening to reduce members' apprehensiveness. For instance, group leaders might share personal aspects of their background and their rationale for being at a workshop before inviting the group to begin.

Other openings can be specifically tailored to the group's theme. In a weekend workshop on the second-chance family, participants were initially asked to do three things on the theme "Reliving My Early Family Memories" (Challis, 1979):

- Picture a scene that you remember from your childhood while you were sitting at the family table.
- Imagine you are taking a snapshot of that family scene.
- Now, if you want, change the scene in any way you wish.

Participants were given the opportunity to share their scenes and memories in pairs and to form simulated families and work through some unfulfilled childhood needs.

Any opening that stimulates group members to find their own entry into the theme can be employed. Appropriate openings lead to productive group interaction related to the theme. The leader acts to maintain the group's dynamic balance and further the intensity and meaningfulness of the group process. As well as balancing the I-We-It triangle, the leader also models characteristics of self-actualization for participants by responding authentically, taking responsibility for thoughts and feelings, and listening actively to and sometimes reflecting the comments of others. In other words, leaders are really participant/leaders. Cohn notes that there is a tendency in new groups for members to direct most of their initial comments to the leader rather than to one another. She maintains that the TCI leader can respond directly and openly to promote a constructive group atmosphere. Unlike analytic group therapy, in which the leader can choose to ignore participants' comments or questions or deflect them by use of interpretations or indirect responses, the TCI leader typically responds directly and authentically. Thus, Ruth Cohn might answer the person who discloses feelings of anxiety by sharing some feelings of her own. To a person asking for suggestions on how to solve a particular problem, she might ask for more detail about the problem, or she might reveal examples of problem solving from her own life or practice. Members would thus be guided to find their own solutions. In any case, Cohn would emphasize the positive aspects of the member's comments. Negative feelings, she believes, can be integrated better when group members have achieved a sense of trust and caring for each other.

Perhaps the single most important aspect of leadership, particularly

during the opening time/space humanistic (1971) stresses that the leader is seeking the warm room conditions of participation as possible, to imagine the responses and their implications for the levels of the group. In such a session needs to be

#### *The Leader's Role*

Throughout the workshop method and process between the I-We-It move beyond the can be tricky. Personal dynamics of the group (Challis (1972) concerned to go

- identity—
- control/p influence
- individual to meet n
- acceptance have to g

These emotional group's early stage sacrificing valuable crucial.

The "snapshot" make transitions interrupts the group thoughts or feelings very briefly his or interrupt each other the group conduct. Participants are "very peaceful."

The leader's living/learning process the I-We-It factor

during the opening segments of the group, is clearly conceptualizing the time/space human-situation environment that constitutes the globe. Cohn (1971) stresses the importance of pregroup work to get information on who is seeking the workshop, who is resistant, who is paying, and what the room conditions and time constraints are. Once she has as much information as possible, she uses her own fantasy to experiment with themes, imagine the responses of the participants, and think of introductory procedures and their impact on the anxiety, experience, need, and excitement levels of the group. In other words, group leaders think through their own I needs, the hypothetical needs of the group, and what the task of the first session needs to be.

#### *The leader as guardian of the method*

Throughout the group's life, the leader acts as the *guardian of the method* and performs a number of balancing acts. One tightrope is between the I-We-It points of the triangle. Encouraging group members to move beyond their personal feelings and attend more closely to the theme can be tricky. People are generally more invested in themselves and their own dynamics than in a work theme.

Challis (1972), for example, notes that all members of new groups are concerned to greater or lesser degrees with four self-oriented issues:

- identity—who am I and what am I to be in this group?
- control/power—fencing with one another for control and influence;
- individual needs/group needs—hoping and waiting for the group to meet my individual needs;
- acceptance/intimacy—will I be liked and how close to others do I have to get?

These emotional issues are legitimate concerns of group members in the group's early stages. The leader's ability to redirect these concerns without sacrificing valuable member input and cutting off the flow of the group is crucial.

The "snapshot technique" is used in the TCI method to help the group make transitions (Shaffer & Galinsky, 1974). At a given moment the leader interrupts the group process and asks members to pinpoint their inner thoughts or feelings. Then the leader asks each member in turn to describe very briefly his or her experience at that moment. Members are asked not to interrupt each other and to proceed swiftly around the circle. In this way, the group conducts a brief illumination of itself to find out where the We is. Participants are encouraged to offer impressions as terse as "I'm scared" or "very peaceful."

The leader acts as guardian of the method and directly encourages living/learning primarily by trying to maintain a dynamic balance between the I-We-It factors. In flowing TCI groups the leader intervenes less and

less. However, leaders remain essential for theme-centered interactional groups, even though members may be experienced leaders themselves. If members have to divide their attention and take over the balancing task, the effectiveness of their work may suffer. Sometimes individuals monopolize the group or suffer quietly. Other group members might allow this to happen without comment. At such times, leaders use their judgment to remedy the situation. They might make use of encounter methods, psychodrama, Gestalt techniques, or any other aspects of their training that might help to promote the group experience. A psychoanalytically trained TCI leader, for example, might interpret some group behavior in the light of transference phenomena. However, participants are always their own chairpersons, and remain responsible for their own growth and for solutions to their own disturbances. Members, however, are not asked to be aware of the group process at all times, as leaders are.

In groups that have themes that are strongly interpersonal, such as "Being in This Group My Way" or "Discovering My Relatedness to You," the theme itself merges easily with the We and I dimensions. In groups that have more academic themes, dynamic balancing insures a personalization of the subject to stimulate the group. When the group's theme is not a therapeutic one, the leader needs to exercise authority to guard the theme. The leader of nontherapy groups must perform a balancing act—encouraging a sufficiently personal level of group interaction while avoiding dealing with serious pathology. The leader will choose not to explore the intense personal experiences of disturbed members but will stress facts that support self-esteem and that relate to other group members and the theme. A man's severe communication problems, for example, may be identified as a symptom of his need for recognition and used as a stimulus for exploring his interactional style in the group.

Just as in therapy groups, where the implicit theme is "Getting Well," awareness of self and others in TCI groups is relevant to the theme. In some groups (for example, Tavistock groups), the leader deliberately comes on like a parental authority figure with whom the members struggle. In the TCI group, leaders stay with their own here-and-now experiences in an open, courageous way. While leading a group with the theme of "Growing in Relation to My Authority Figures," Ruth Cohn responded in the following way to one of the group members (Cohn, 1972, p. 871):

*Group leader:* Elaine, you look at me as if I had all the answers to your questions. I feel uncomfortable when you look at me this way.

*Elaine:* But you are the expert here. You must know how to handle these girls.

*Group leader:* I am really less of an expert with high school girls than you. But I wonder whether words like "expert" and "handle" get in your way of being alert to your own convictions and feelings—and maybe the girls?

For Elaine, I authorities—the mentioned earli Elaine's indirect tion of the group Elaine. She says old. Take your ti Remember a situ what you ought t and share their o dependent in de kinship within th issues of authori

#### APPRAISAL

The theme-c amount of attent porary groups he does not actively Because of its reli traditional group it, and actually i example, amende group members t setting a ten-sess

As with so i dearth of empiric contributions of i instance, showing format meet their that do demonst changes as a resu lished (see Challi

I have tried te domain of legitim; humanistic pione to give to and ge disturbances whi modeling an autho than on curing pi ence of leaders w group members. I experiential techn This is because TC viewing a group ti



For Elaine, the leader is the authority; for other group members other authorities—the government, the school system, and parents—have been mentioned earlier in the group. In this excerpt, the leader deals with Elaine's indirect request for personal help and attention with an elaboration of the group theme and with the intent of returning the power back to Elaine. She says "I would like you to remember how it was to be 15 years old. Take your time to remember and now pretend you are 15 years old. Remember a situation where your father, mother, or a teacher told you what you ought to do." Gradually, members pick up on Elaine's memories and share their own accounts of feeling insecure, rejected, exasperated, or dependent in dealing with parental authority. This stimulates a sense of kinship within the group and helps members explore their own personal issues of authority.

#### APPRAISAL

The theme-centered interactional method has not generated the same amount of attention or sensationalism in North America as other contemporary groups have. One reason for this relative lack of press is that TCI does not actively reject many of the tenets of traditional group therapy. Because of its relative loyalty to traditional psychoanalytic concepts, many traditional group leaders have little trouble accepting TCI, learning about it, and actually incorporating it into their practice. One therapist, for example, amended her more traditional approach with seven uninvolved group members by giving the group a theme on the topic of isolation and setting a ten-session limit (Buchanan, 1969).

As with so many other experiential group approaches, there is a dearth of empirical research evaluating the effectiveness of TCI and the contributions of its respective components. There are no good data, for instance, showing to what extent organizational groups that use the TCI format meet their immediate and long-range objectives. The few studies that do demonstrate an increase in self-esteem or positive behavioral changes as a result of participating in a TCI growth group remain unpublished (see Challis, 1974; Sheehan, 1977).

I have tried to indicate that TCI occupies a comfortable seat within the domain of legitimate group therapy and education. TCI falls solidly within humanistic pioneering. TCI leaders are truly participant/leaders: they try to give to and get from the group and deal with and share their own disturbances while encouraging others to do likewise. The focus is on modeling an authentic and personal experience for the participants rather than on curing pathology. Consequently, the method requires the presence of leaders who do not put their own needs before the needs of the group members. However, leaders must be comfortable drawing upon experiential techniques from other sources, such as Gestalt and encounter. This is because TCI is more a conceptual framework for structuring and viewing a group than an arsenal of techniques.

100's in German!  
not true!

A central virtue of the TCI approach is its potentially broad range of application. It is one of the relatively few group methods that is equally at home in therapeutic, educational, and organizational contexts. The method can be easily adapted to suit virtually all populations and types of group work. The idea of fitting complex problems and needs into workable themes has a logical appeal. Moreover, there is no limit to the kinds of themes that may be fruitfully explored in a group setting. These include personal themes that reflect concerns about loneliness, alienation, life goals, and sexuality, and themes that emerge naturally within given groups, such as delegating work, clearing communication channels, and teaching subject matter. A skilled TCI group leader has a powerful conceptual tool in hand with which to further personal development as well as professional skills and societal awareness.

#### SUMMARY

The theme-centered interactional approach to groups was developed by Ruth Cohn, based on her psychoanalytic training and her commitment to humanistic ideals. The Workshop Institute for Living-Learning, operating in both Europe and North America, is the main vehicle for TCI training.

The basic concepts underlying the theme-centered interactional approach include *living/learning transference and countertransference*, the *theme*, and *dynamic balancing*. Living/learning implies that education, psychotherapy, and encounter can share a commitment to a live learning experience. Transference and countertransference are psychoanalytic concepts. TCI groups stress that members' reactions are based on both present behaviors and historical needs. The theme is the most distinguishable feature of the TCI group. A group theme should be personally engaging and live, offering a structure but not an agenda for the group. Dynamic balancing suggests the need to integrate the individual, the group, and the theme on a continuing basis and to do so within the reality of the globe, or outside environment.

The TCI group emphasizes the postulates that *each member is his or her own chairperson* and that *disturbances take precedence*. Several communication ground rules, such as the need for members to speak for themselves, exist as reminders to enhance group functioning. The group leader uses opening techniques to involve members, reduce their feelings of being threatened, and orient them to the theme. The leader does considerable preparation to select an appropriate theme and subsequently acts as *guardian of the method*, intervening when necessary to insure that the triangle in the globe remains in dynamic balance.

The theme-centered interactional group exists somewhere between education and therapy and has a very broad range of application. It is easily adapted to serve educational, therapeutic and organizational populations with diverse needs.

#### REFERENCES

- Buchanan, F. S., & Ruitenbeek (E. Challis, E. Freedman, & E. Challis, E. Freedman). *A male-female relationship*. Union Gr. Challis, E. Person Cohen, M. B. Cohn, R. C. From interactional r Atherton Pres Cohn, R. C. Th educators. *Join Cohn, R. C. Livin (Eds.), Confror Macmillan, 19 Cohn, R. C. Style Sager & H. S. Brunner/Maze Demarest, E. W., & M. Rosenbaum York: Free Pre Durkin, H. E., & concept and 1973. *An over Gordon, M. The 1972.**
- Langler, G. *Biol Unpublished* ; Mullan, H., & Ro & M. Rosenba York: Free Pre Ronall, R., & Wil *Psychotherapy* Rubin, S. S. *Ar Unpublished* ( N.Y. 10011.)
- Shaffer, J. B. P., & Englewood Cl Sheehan, M. A. C *self-esteem ar tation*, Colum

## REFERENCES

- Buchanan, F. S. Notes on theme-centered time-limited group therapy. In H. M. Ruitenbeek (Ed.), *Group therapy today*. New York: Atherton Press, 1969.
- Challis, E. *The dynamics of groups*. Unpublished manuscript, York University, 1972.
- Challis, E. *Freedom is a constant struggle: Moving from stereotype to personhood in a male-female consciousness-raising workshop*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Union Graduate School, 1974.
- Challis, E. Personal communication, Sept. 13, 1979.
- Cohen, M. B. Countertransference and anxiety. *Psychiatry*, 1952, 15, 231-243.
- Cohn, R. C. From couch to circle to community: Beginnings of the theme-centered interactional method. In H. M. Ruitenbeek (Ed.), *Group therapy today*. New York: Atherton Press, 1969.
- Cohn, R. C. The theme-centered interactional method: Group therapists as educators. *Journal of Group Psychotherapy and Process*, 1970, 32, 19-36.
- Cohn, R. C. Living-learning encounters. In G. Gottsegen, M. Gottsegen, & L. Blank (Eds.), *Confrontation: Encounters in self and interpersonal awareness*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.
- Cohn, R. C. Style and spirit of the theme-centered interactional method. In C. J. Sager & H. S. Kaplan (Eds.), *Progress in group and family therapy*. New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1972.
- Demarest, E. W., & Teicher, A. Transference in group psychotherapy. In H. Mullan & M. Rosenbaum (Eds.), *Group psychotherapy: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Free Press, 1978.
- Durkin, H. E., & Glatzer, H. T. Transference neurosis in group psychotherapy: The concept and the reality. In L. R. Wolberg & E. K. Schwartz (Eds.), *Group therapy: 1973. An overview*. New York: Intercontinental Medical Book Corp., 1973.
- Gordon, M. *Theme-centered interaction*. Baltimore: National Educational Press, 1972.
- Langler, G. *Biology unit on biological stress taught using the WILL method*. Unpublished manuscript, Oberlin College, 1973.
- Mullan, H., & Rosenbaum, M. Transference and countertransference. In H. Mullan & M. Rosenbaum (Eds.), *Group psychotherapy: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). New York: Free Press, 1978.
- Ronall, R., & Wilson, B. J. Theme-centered interactional groups. In R. Herink (Ed.), *Psychotherapy handbook*. New York: New American Library, 1980.
- Rubin, S. S. *An introduction to the theme-centered interactional approach*. Unpublished manuscript, 1978. (Available from WILL, 126 W. 11th St., New York, N.Y. 10011.)
- Shaffer, J. B. P., & Galinsky, M. D. *Models of group therapy and sensitivity training*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974.
- Sheehan, M. A. C. *The effects of theme-centered growth groups on the self-concept, self-esteem and interpersonal openness of adults*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University Teacher's College, 1977.