The Group: Joy on Thursday

"All right," bellowed the baldish, bearded leader to some 200 men and women sitting cross-legged and shoeless on the wooden floor. "Let's everybody begin by screaming as long and as loud as possible." A wild, raggedy, piercing shriek rose from the crowd. When it subsided, the participants dispersed into smaller groups, where they arm wrestled, fell backward into each other's arms, occasionally hugged each other warmly and kept pouring out to whoever was in earshot the most intimate emotions. By the end of the three-hour session, the participants were euphoric; one matronly woman wept softly. "Why can't it always be like this?" she asked.

Bell-in? Bellevue Hospital? No, just the auditorium of San Francisco's First Unitarian Church, where 200 middle-class participants had paid $5 each for a one-night introduction to an encounter group—a relatively leaderless, structureless, agendless "be-in," intended to express human feelings and to cultivate close emotional ties between people. The San Franciscans had come for a variety of reasons; some were just curious, others were looking for a short cut out of an increasingly urban, technologically complex, bureaucratic society and others were lonely and isolated. Whatever their motives, they are all part of the so-called human-potentiality (or sensitivity-training) movement that is involving Americans in their biggest emotional binge since V-J Day. "These groups are the most rapidly spreading social phenomenon in the country," observes psychologist Carl R. Rogers approvingly. "They are helping break through the alienation and dehumanization of our culture." But some behaviorists worry that the human-potential movement is faddism at best and just plain psychological dynamite at worst. "Encounter groups are like a new religious cult," complains Berkeley psychologist Edward Sampson. "They have uniforms and ceremonies and cult leaders. It's a religion in the worst sense; you do it on Sunday and then forget it for the rest of the week."

Growth: Encounter groups come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. There are weekly four-hour "microlabs" involving as many as 100 people, weekend marathons of almost continuous emotional involvement for groups of fifteen people, five-day retreats at luxurious resorts in rural settings for large groups at costs up to $1,000 a person, and sometimes nude groups whose participants shed their clothes as well as their inhibitions. By most recent estimates, there are between 60 and 70 encounter-group "growth centers" in the U.S., including Chicago's Oasis, Washington's Orison Institute and Laos House in Austin, Texas. Business also has gone into the field: Detroit's American Behavioral Science Training Laboratories are owned by the former rent-a-car magnate Warren Avis; Atlanta's Human Development Institute, a 45-man organization which grosses $1.5 million a year by conducting group sessions for businessmen, educators and intra- and inter-group sessions throughout the South, is a subsidiary of Bell & Howell.

Encounter groups are mainly aimed at the so-called "normal neurotic," the average adjusted citizen who psychologists say could presumably gain from greater emotional openness and experience, although people with more serious psychological problems often enlist as well. Group leaders draw on a mixed bag of psychological theories and techniques to accomplish this aim, including the experiences of group psychotherapy and group-dynamics laboratories, the erotic theories of the late Dr. Wilhelm Reich, the psychodrama techniques of J.L. Moreno and the peak-experience psychologists of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow. All these elements (and others) are combined in an effort to help group participants work out their problems in dramatic—and often physical—confrontations with other people.

Adult: But at the same time, most group leaders insist they are not practicing psychotherapy. Participants, they say, are assumed to be mentally healthy rather than sick; little effort is made to delve into case histories. "We're not practicing medicine," says New York psychologist Harold Streitfeld. "It's adult education. We're teaching people about emotions in the same way we teach them about mathematics."

The classic form is the "7 [for training] -group," developed shortly after World War II by three social psychologists working for Washington's National Training Laboratories and now popular on the East Coast. The focus is on the "here-and-now"—the immediate, commonsensical aspect of the group. Participants come together—much like an assortment of people in an airport waiting room who begin to evolve into a group on the spot—and start talking, but on no assigned basis. There is no structure or organization and the group "leader" declines to direct the discussion. The task of the participants is to fill the vacuum left by the absence of a dominant leader and of an assigned topic for discussion. The T-groups explained one of NTL's directors, Charles N. Seashore, is designed to sharpen participants' perceptions of themselves and others and of group dynamics.

Personal: Encounter groups, in contrast to T-groups, are far less concerned with group dynamics. Instead, they focus on the individual, on getting each group participant to talk about and express his feelings as deeply and spontaneously as possible. And although group members talk mainly about the present, they sometimes try to work out their personal problems and past traumas in the groups. Not surprisingly, perhaps, encounter groups developed originally and now flourish in California, the birthplace of the hippies and other hedonistic movements; they have only recently begun to spread across the U.S.

The mecca for encounter groups in California is the Esalen Institute, which holds forth on the side of a verdant mountain in Big Sur, rising above the rugged Pacific Coast. Last year, Esalen, which has received extensive publicity

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Bindrim mused, "he might, by this gesture, gain the freedom to also disrobe emotionally. If this were true, it might be desirable to first disrobe and then interact, thus shortening the process and intensifying the beneficial results."

Bindrim first tested his ideas on a group of twenty middle-class people who gathered for a weekend at a nudist camp in Escondido, Calif. To avoid the possibilities of embarrassment or even an orgy, Bindrim required the participants to stay together throughout the session and to eschew any sexual expression that would be offensive in a conventional social setting. He opened the almost continuous program—participating with only six hours' sleep—by asking the group members to discuss their feelings about the prospect of nudity. After an hour's discussion, the group moved to a Jacuzzi bath, where they could bathe either nude or in swimming suits and where the water was at body temperature. "In the bath you don't know where the water really ends and the body begins," says Bindrim. "Touching becomes more casual and relaxed." In less than half an hour, all the participants were nude. Bindrim considered his initial experiment a success and has since conducted about 30 other nude marathons.

Elites: College students, naturally more open to experience than their elders, have been active participants in the human-potentiality movement, getting their sensitivity training from a wide variety of psychology courses, freshman-orientation programs and free universities. At the University of California's Berkeley campus, encounter groups have been around for several years. When sensitivity sessions were first introduced on campus, says 20-year-old Charles Webel, a former group leader, "they were somewhat clandestine, with only an elite group of trainers and initiates participating. In the second stage, starting last year, they were considerably popularized and it was the thing to do. Now, there is a growing de-mythologization of groups as people realize that all they can really do is show you what you are in the eyes of others."

Berkeley psychologist Sampson, one of the first to use sensitivity groups on the campus, doubts that students' expectations are likely to become realistic. In 1962, Sampson included T-groups in his course on "small group structure and process" to teach students about group processes. As the popularity of the groups increased, Sampson found students taking the class mainly to participate in the groups rather than to learn about them. "They came in wanting psychotherapy, wanting to touch somebody or have an experience," he says. "The participants are people who epitomize the trouble with society. They come for an emotional jolt, for the week's pill."

Dr. Clifford J. Sager, president of the 2,000-member American Group Psychotherapy Association, has expressed concern about the proliferation of sensitivity groups, both on and off the campus. For one thing, he says, many group leaders are untrained and are unable to recognize danger signs among the participants in the sessions. Sager cites the example of a girl who has recently received sensitivity training at a New York growth center and now plans to lead her own groups. "She is very sick. This is murder. It's like stopping somebody on the street who has always wanted to be a doctor and giving him a prescription pad with his name on it."

Moreover, Sager says, the new techniques are being picked up indiscriminately, "even by better, established practitioners," although their effects have scarcely been studied. But there is little Sager's AGPA can do about the situation; no laws regulate the use of therapeutic techniques because states have been unable to define psychotherapy satisfactorily. At most, the AGPA can only try to educate the public and investigate its members for unethical practices.

Strength: Most group leaders contend that there is not much danger in sensitivity training. California psychologist Frederick Stoller, who pioneered in developing marathon sessions, says that everyone has the strength to deal with the encounter experience. In some groups that he has led, Stoller recalls, psychotics have broken down and become disorganized. But, he advises, if the leader doesn't become frightened, these people will often go through the experience and come well out of it."

Adds University of Michigan psychologist Richard Mann: "The thing a really inefficient trainer does is produce a really boring group. That's much more than that people will go crazy."

Actually, for all the dramatic examples of success or failure, no one really knows how effective these groups are. (The same problem, of course, besets orthodox psychiatry and psychoanalysis.) What is needed is large-scale, objective research on what happens to participants after they've left the groups and returned to their normal environments. So far, the main methods psychologists have devised to do this are through personal feedback from a client and the psychologist's own personal observation. And these techniques, observes Notre Dame psychologist Thomas L. Whitman, have grave weaknesses. For one thing, people may say good things about the experience either because they actually feel better or because they don't want to seem ungrateful to the group leader. "And besides," Whitman adds, "therapists are biased observers because of which is a theory of interaction that is not working to negate every- thing that they are doing."

Dr. Abraham Maslow, a former president of the American Psychological Association, who has studied many psychological experiments to help people achieve their highest potential, has provided one of the best evaluations of sensitivity groups to date. Five years ago, Maslow "reluctantly" took a look at the groups run by the National Training Laboratories in Bethel, Maine. "I was brought up in psychoanalysis," says Maslow, "and I expected a lot of crap. Instead, he was fascinated by what he saw: "These people behaved and talked in a spontaneous and free way that I have ordinarily associated with people who have been under psychoanalysis for a year or two at least."

As a result, Maslow revised his psychoanalytic view that changing one's character is a very long-term process. "Apparently, it can happen a lot faster," he says, "very much faster in this kind of social situation."

Frontier: Since that time, Maslow has taken a closer look at the entire human-potential movement. Although he has found "an awful lot of charlatanism" in the movement, Maslow says that "there is much careful, very promising, even revolutionary work going on. If we take the best of it, it's of the utmost importance. It's the great frontier in social psychology." Whether they're a fad or a new frontier, sensitivity groups are likely to be around for a long time. Notre Dame psychologist Whitman suggests that American society is developing into a "therapy culture," in which people are convinced by all the talk about psychological problems that they themselves are suffering and need professional help. In such a culture, the sensitivity groups, properly supervised, could serve a valuable function. The psychiatrist's role, says Gendlin, often acts as a "paid friend" for his patient, and this role could just as well be performed by encounter groups. "You shouldn't have to plead sick in order to have personal relationships," says Gendlin. "I think these groups will eventually become an institution in our social fabric, like friendship is."
for its nude encounter groups, attracted 10,000 participants; this year it expects some 25,000. Founded in the late 1950s by Michael Murphy, a Stanford philosophy and psychology graduate who inherited the Big Sur site from his grandmother, Esalen initially focused on meditation and talk of possibilities for human potential. Now, it tries to promote growth by whatever means show promise.

**Body:** In all its programs, heavy emphasis is placed on the body. Dr. William Schutz, one of Esalen’s leading figures, has pioneered in developing physical techniques for encounter groups, drawing on psychodrama, Gestalt therapy and the “somatopsyche” techniques of psychologist Alexander Lowen. “The body is really being brought back into psychology,” the 43-year-old psychologist notes with pleasure. In his five-day marathon “More Joy” workshops at Esalen, which are subscribed to nationally in advance, Schutz tries to bridge the gap between body and mind. The first day is spent talking rather generally about what people want and expect to get out of the sessions. In the evening, the participants take part in a microblast, where they may pound pillows and scream, look into each other’s eyes and scream or just close their eyes and go inside themselves. Another technique Schutz uses is a high-school dance exercise in which all the women line up on one side of the room and all the men on the other. One by one they look over and ask a girl to dance, either by touching her face or some other nonverbal method. She may accept or decline by pushing him away or merely failing to respond. “Hopefully, by the end of the evening, you are open to the feeling that anything goes,” says Schutz.

During the remainder of the workshop, participants try to work out the feelings that have been generated, to attain “joy,” which, for Schutz, means “realizing your potential.” Encounter sessions are held every day from 10 a.m. until lunch and from 9 p.m. till midnight or later. The afternoons are filled with lectures, large-group fantasy (in which people let their thoughts wander together), massage, yoga or bathing in Esalen’s hot sulphur springs. “On Monday and Tuesday, the second and third days of the workshop, we begin to dig down and get at the feelings,” explains Schutz. “At first, you dig up all the negative feelings and look at them. Usually by Wednesday these negative feelings start to come and they’re often more difficult to deal with than the positive feelings. And on Thursday comes joy.”

**Nudism:** Los Angeles psychologist Paul Bindrim, 48, conducted the first nude sensitivity group in June 1967, after participating in encounters for seven years. He had observed then a growing tendency among group members to disrobe as emotional intimacy and transparency developed. “I had written to a paper on nudism at a psychology conference. Bindrim saw the connection: “If a participant disrobed physically.”

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