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## Encounter Group (T group)

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### Synonyms

[Meeting](#); [Person-to-person-relationship](#); [Dialogical relationship](#); [Face-to-face relationship](#)

### Definition

In humanistic orientations, an encounter group is a form of group psychotherapy based on trust in the self-developing process, mutual acknowledging, and the meeting of the group members as persons.

### The Philosophical Basis: The Human as Person

Different psychotherapeutic orientations, based on different images of the human being and of society, adhere to different models of group psychotherapy. With the paradigm shift of humanistic and existential psychotherapies some of them, particularly the person-centered approach, developed groups for self-development and psychotherapy that are called encounter groups (Rogers 1970; Schmid 1994/1996; Schmid and O'Hara 2007).

*Etymologically*, “encounter” stems from “contra,” the Latin word for “against.” This indicates the vis-à-vis as well as the resistance. It is a famous term in dialogical (or personalistic or encounter) philosophy denoting a special form of meeting and relationship with a profound existential meaning. One can encounter an object (a landscape for instance or a piece of art: “reality encounter”) or a person (“personal encounter”). To en-counter another person first of all means recognizing that the Other really “stands counter,” because he or she is essentially different from me. This is the precondition to respect him or her as a person.

To regard the human being as a *person* means to regard humans as substantial-relational beings combining two inescapable dialectic dimensions of human existence: the substantial (or individual) dimension of being a person and the relational (or dialogic) dimension of becoming a person. These two strands can be found throughout the history of occidental philosophy. On the one hand, *the substantial conception* emphasizes independence and uniqueness, freedom and dignity, unity, sovereignty and self-determination, responsibility, the human rights, etc.; therefore, being a person means being-from-oneself and being-for-oneself. *The relational notion* on the other hand highlights relationship, dialogue, partnership, connection with the world, interconnectedness among humans, community; hence, being a person means being-from-and-in-relationship; that is, being through and toward others and,

consequently, also for others. We are not only in relationships; as persons, we are relationships. This dialectic tension of autonomy and interconnectedness, self-reliance and commitment, sovereignty and solidarity uniquely characterizes being human (Schmid 1998, 2013).

### **The Epistemological Basis: Encounter as Meeting Person-to-Person**

*The way to meet another individual as a person is called personal encounter. It is a way of interpersonal relating which takes into account both the fundamental equality of humans and their diversity: being-with and being-counter, a face-to-face relationship (Schmid 2006).*

In the philosophy of personalism, encounter means to regard the other person not as an object to be investigated (which would mean to instrumentalize him or her) and not as an alter ego (a close friend a priori, an identifiable individual), but rather an entirely different person. An encounter always has the character of the unexpected, of surprise: it cannot be manufactured, and it cannot be used. Its starting point is separateness, distance. In the opposite resistance is met: there is no encounter without confrontation as the word “en-counter” suggests. Only appreciating this fact of fundamental difference makes it possible to accept another person as truly an Other, thus *acknowledging them in their personhood*, as “a continuous enigma which keeps us awake” (Levinas 1961). So, encounter is always a risk, an adventure which contains a creative seed, a breakthrough to something new. For an interpersonal encounter, this means that both affinity and alienation can be experienced at the same time.

An encounter relationship originates and centers in the Other. This takes into account that the epistemological direction, the way of understanding, has its origin in the Other whose communication is a way of revealing him- or herself, thus requiring a personal response – and is not a matter of questioning, interpreting, or diagnosing. To encounter does not mean to conclude from me to the Other; on the contrary, *the epistemological movement goes from the Other to me*. To learn to

know another person is not a matter of adding a little difference to something already known (the traditional way of diagnosis), it relies on the openness for an immediate experience of the Other in the “kairos,” the unique given moment.

The *im-media-cy* is born through the fact that all means that separate us “decay” (Buber 1937) become unnecessary, surplus. For this it is important first of all to dispense with all techniques and methods, all means, that serve as a protection to defend against what comes across, what is encountered. For encounter lies beyond all methods. It is involvement in the immediacy of the experience of relationship. So, a constitutive element of personal encounter is also bodily contact, touching, sensing, and being sensed, “physical interplay” (Buber 1937). Encounter is an intimate, sensual event.

The Other, however, does not come up to me as an anonymous stranger, but as *Thou*. As a person the Other breaks the limits of our knowledge. Instead of knowledge, acknowledgement is required. In facing the Other, I can acknowledge the Other’s uniqueness and qualities. I do not think what I could know about them, but I am ready to accept what they are going to disclose.

This happens by *being present*, which means authentic (congruent, genuine) “empathic listening” with “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers 1970; Schmid 2001/2002) – with far-reaching consequences for therapy: The other person is not someone to be treated or guided or given advice by an expert but is met as person by a person.

The movement always originates in the Thou, also from a developmental perspective: it is the call, the addressing of another human being, which evokes a response, confronts with freedom and risk. Encounter happens to a human long before he or she can aim at obtaining such an experience. Therefore, in an encounter there always lies the *response to a call*, in therapy to a call from a person in need. And from the response follows respons-ability, which is grounded in the fact that nobody else can respond in place of me. This denotes the ethical dimension of encounter.

## The Anthropological Foundation: Encounter Philosophy

*Romano Guardini (1955)* understands encounter as an amazing meeting with the reality of the Other. According to him, encounter means that one is touched by the essence of the opposite. To let this happen, a non-purpose-oriented openness and a distance which leads to amazement are indispensable conditions: encounter cannot be made or created; it is, at one and the same time, both being touched and touching.

According to *Martin Buber (1937)*, being a person consists in the event of encounter or dialogue, of communicating oneself. He defines encounter as the immediacy of the I-Thou-relationship, an event in which one becomes present to the Other. The I is not constituted until such an encounter relationship: ‘The I becomes through the Thou. Becoming an I, I say Thou. [. . .] All real life is encounter.’ (Buber 1937).

*Emmanuel Levinas (1961)* lays emphasis on the priority of the Other. Levinas illustrates that to exist means to be entangled in oneself, caught in the totality of one’s own world. Accordingly, the first alienation of the human being is not being able to get rid of oneself. The awakening from the totality of the being-caught-in-oneself does not happen through “being independent.” Rather, the Other is the power which liberates the I from oneself. Consequently, the foundation of self-confidence is not the reflection on oneself, but the relationship to the Other. This overcomes the limits of the self: the self is born in the relationship to another person, in an original, preceding dialogue. So we can say: The person is dialogue; encounter takes place, where dialogue happens and unfolds.

With this in mind, the basic idea of an I-Thou-relationship was further developed to a *Thou-I-relationship* with the movement from the Other to me, thus also managing to get closer to the verge of the underlying “*fundamental We*” (Schmid 2013). It is integral to the human nature to live in groups, from the family onwards. Usually, the group is also the place where problems arise. Therefore, the group must be considered as the primary locus of psychotherapy (with the dyad as

a special form of group under special circumstances) (Schmid 1994/1996; Schmid and O’Hara 2007).

## The Practice: Group Therapy as Encounter

One of the pioneers of this way of group therapy was Carl Rogers (1970), founder of the person-centered approach. Among the characteristics of encounter groups are the following (Schmid 1994/1996; Schmid and O’Hara 2007):

- They are based on a personal anthropology as a possibility for immediate encounter face to face among the members, including the facilitator. Every given moment (*kairos*) is seen as a challenging chance for intra- and interpersonal experiences.
- The basic conditions of congruence (authenticity), empathy, and unconditional positive regard as modeled by the facilitator(s) foster a climate of trust of being-with each other that brings about a growth process for each member and the group as whole.
- In such an atmosphere, a process of personal and group development takes place enabling an enhanced opportunity to tap one’s resources, deal with problems, and advance the possibility to develop intra- and intergroup relationships.
- The relationship person-to-person is seen as the specific therapeutic agent. It enables multiple and diverse (corrective) experiences of relationship (“therapy through the group and its members” as opposed to “therapy in front of the group” or “the group as the client of the group therapist”). The capability to become open to such experiences is an important criterion for indication for group therapy.
- The group’s process cannot be specifically predicted; special expectations are a hindrance. However, given a personal climate can be developed, it can be trusted that the group develops toward more openness for experience and a sense of interconnectedness and mutuality.

- The leaders of the group understand themselves as facilitators, i.e., as persons that support the group and its members by understanding themselves as authentic group members trusting in the potential (“wisdom”) of the group instead of taking leading, guiding, or expert roles.
- The “moment-to-moment encounter of psychotherapy” (Rogers) happens in the immediate presence. To this corresponds the existential attitude of “presence,” confidently taking part in the present moment of life (which means a lot more than the slogan of “here and now”). In the encounter philosophical perspective presence is the authentic attitude to be, to fully live in the presence: unconditionally accepting the Other, empathically becoming involved in his or her presence, without any prior intention, that is with an openness and a wonder toward experience.
- In order to facilitate the immediacy of the encounter the facilitators refrain from using preconceived or structuring techniques, skills, and training methods.
- Along with verbal communication, the members may choose to communicate with others and on other levels, e.g., through bodily, creative, expressive ways of art.
- The group is seen as an important interface of individual and society and thus has an anticipatory function for societal and political change and a sociotherapeutic impact.

## Summary

Encounter groups in psychotherapy and related fields, based on a humanistic, personalistic, dialogical image of the human being and of society, serve the persons involved by facilitating their

capability of acknowledging themselves and the others as truly Others and thus develop their self and society in a constructive way.

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