

ETHNOTHERAPY -- A NEW HOPE FOR SOCIETY?

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I found Stanley Siderman's article in the April, 1974, issue of the Journal most interesting. What fascinated me most, especially in the first part of the article, was not the fact that whites and blacks finally have had a chance to sit together in groups and resolve rationally some of their racial prejudices, but the description of some of the methods that Dr. Cobbs, Mr. Siderman and their associates have developed in reaching repressed material within the group setting.

Ethnotherapy is presented as a helpful technique that claims to be especially successful in overcoming resistances within the group. The deliberate disarrangement of the common sense of reality by the therapists is, indeed, a powerful and very useful psychotherapeutic tool, helpful in overcoming intellectualized defenses. Its importance is not yet appreciated by many, and it often is criticized by those who fail to understand it. But the author states incorrectly that, "the confrontation experience makes the Ethnotherapy group unique among group approaches". Although the technique is somewhat unusual, several others, including Spotnitz, Greenwald and this writer, have developed various confrontation approaches to deal effectively with character resistances, and they are being used successfully. Some of these include techniques that resemble in many ways "the condition of inapplicability" but also other modalities. The sweeping and clearly exaggerated claims of both text and title gave rise, therefore, to some questions and suspicion. These were substantiated later in the article.

Careful evaluation of the described procedures made it evident soon that what was claimed to be a markedly new contribution to group psychotherapy was in reality an encounter group adaptation for resolving superficial layers of racial conflict. Although it appears that the procedure is clinically useful to the participants, ethnotherapy seems to be what the name implies: Therapy of ethnic problems. It is not psychotherapy at all. It uses powerful techniques that can, and in my opinion should, sometimes be used in psychotherapy. But it is not based on a therapeutic alliance, recognizes no working through, and is basically a one-shot affair using scare tactics. It resembles, but is not, psychotherapy. It aims at changing attitudes dramatically, basically disregarding the psyche and its needs as of that moment.

In the second half of the article it became obvious that group pressure and group mores were repeatedly used to force the patient and to overcome not only his resistances but also his value systems, till he yields and accepts "better" values, those sanctioned by the group and its leaders. The old "Mack Truck" approach that was so popular in Synanon is introduced again. This method was always effective in the past and is effective now. Whether we want to use it or not depends on our human and psychotherapeutic philosophies. When a whole group bombards and ridicules the defensive structure of a person, most people will succumb, the defensive structure will break down at least partly, and the individual is likely to change somewhat, if not characterologically than at least in outward behavior. When such a course is followed within the context of continuing psychotherapy, in which a therapeutic alliance exists and a relationship of trust has had a chance to develop over time, such an approach has one meaning. The patient has in effect given consent to being subjected to such treatment, knowing that although painful, it might be effective and for his own benefit. When such "Mack Truck" approach is used as a therapeutic modality of a

weekend retreat, during a one-time, twenty hour session, and in a highly charged and racially polarized group, this is a horse of a different color altogether. If enough psychological coercion exists, racial prejudices can, indeed, be broken down and a different set of values may be substituted, at least for the short run. This is hardly a new modality, nor should it be classified under therapy. It offers no hope at all, neither new nor old. Such techniques have been known, instead, for a long time and fall under the general heading of "brainwashing".

These suspicions became even stronger as one continued reading the article, and were eventually sadly confirmed in the last five pages. Reverse racial prejudice of the worst kind is evident beginning with page 184, as the author claims that "while blacks' defensive maneuvers crumble like the walls of a demolished building, that is all at once, (sic! That's good?) whites' resistances peel off like layers of an onion, one at a time. For the whites, their emotional life is bound up with anxiety and obsessive maneuverings to avoid it. They cannot admit to things which they interpret as errors, failures or embarrassments. They refuse to reveal anything significant about their personal or professional lives, stoutly maintaining they are only interested in learning about their prejudice and racism".

The dynamic make-up of all whites is described as having only one form, just as all blacks are seen as having the same defenses and resistances. Color of skin, not unique personal histories, shape the character and personality structures of individuals, according to this strange, racist, theory. The author is apparently insensitive to the fact that this form of racial prejudice is in no way more redeeming than the racial prejudice he wishes to eliminate or replace. Mr. Sideman, on page 186, goes even further in describing his simplistic and unscientific Weltanschauung. He says, "the white woman, envious of the black sisterhood, longing for the warmth

in the black man, and wanting to be seen as an individual rather than a stereotyped white woman, remains apart and distant as long as she is afraid to make any moves toward her black counterpart." Speaking of the white men in the group, the author states on page 187, in all seriousness, "then, faced with the bleakness of their spurious arrogance and invincibility, they can admit that they do indeed envy the black man's 'primitive' emotionality and his 'soul', contrasting these with their own shallow feelings and their difficulties in giving and receiving love.... The white man begins to see that in striving for economic wealth, power and social prestige, he has lost touch with his own feelings. When he sees the warmth of the blacks, in contrast to his own alienation he can reevaluate that the source of his real strength is in his own inner self". Were such statements not found in a seemingly serious article, they would surely have been dismissed as grossly prejudiced, the productions of an unsophisticated bigot.

The author says in the last paragraph of his article that "racism is a disease which infects almost everyone in our society". This is indeed true, apparently not only for the patients who come to these ethnotherapy groups but also for the therapists. Reverse racism based on white guilt or black bitterness is as much of a disease as the racism that infected the white man in his relations with his black brothers. It should have been obvious and beyond any need to spell it out, that all men and all women, both white and black, suffer from pain, hurt and fear, and are the same in their humanity. Racial prejudice is a symptom of an ill personality. It is best treated by focusing on the underlying hurt and hate that bring a person to regard another human being as being lesser than himself. As patients become more conscious of their repressed conflicts and able to hate and love with less fear and less guilt, their need to displace and to project such feelings on "others" is lesser also. Racial prejudice then falls by the wayside, for the underlying need for

it has been eliminated. The author of this pretentious article seems to ignore such basic observations, and his conclusions are of questionable validity. His approach raises many ethical problems of great significance. The cure, as described, is probably no better than the illness itself.

The editors of the International Journal of Group Psychotherapy may have been right, nevertheless, in deciding to publish this article. We live in an era of much irrationality, and racial problems are high on the list of strongly charged issues. Had it been rejected, some might have claimed, with no justification whatsoever, that such rejection was due to racial prejudice, not due to its own obvious shortcomings. Furthermore, the article has merit in raising thoughtfully the problem of effectiveness of psychotherapeutic interventions, although it fails to address itself seriously to this most important problem, except in passing.

It is regrettable that the guilt and anger that are associated with this tragic problem confuse even otherwise rational beings. In this sense, the article is truly reflective on the confusion of the age, in which good intentions frequently serve as justification for questionable actions. But the Journal, as a scientific publication and as the official organ of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, aims at raising the professional standards of the practice of serious psychotherapy, not at giving credence to most questionable approaches. It bears repeating again that articles in the Journal are representative only of the author's opinion. Surely, neither the Journal nor AGPA can be part to the one-sided and unscientific racial bent of this article.