Groups: The Sense of Belonging

By AMITAI ETZIONI

NEXT TIME you face a problem — any problem — don't call your mother (certainly not your former mother-in-law) or a therapist, minister, gardener, or another professional. Like thousands of recent New Yorkers and millions before them, call a group. Better yet, join one.

Groups are a recent New York "thing." There are groups to help bewildered widows to cope and groups to teach homemakers to arrange flowers; groups to increase consciousness and groups to reduce weight; groups for sex therapy and groups for block patrols, and groups for — you name it. All replace, in part, past reliance on family, church, community and professionals. They thus fill a void left by institutions that are crumbling and professionals who are less trusted than in earlier decades.

Fortunately, groups are to social science what the wheel is to mechanics: a pivotal, well-known and studied piece of equipment. The opportunities groups offer are often studied, as are the booby traps they set. For anyone who sets out to launch or enrich his or her group life, here are some elementary observations:

First, know thy group. Most groups, though not all, are "artificial" and "special-purpose." Unlike the traditional family, village community, or New York ethnic groups, most recent groups are deliberately composed, usually for one specific purpose. While most have an underlying psychic, emotional and social purpose, their manifest goals are typically carefully delineated to investing or needlepoint, cooperative shopping or overcoming smoking, but they rarely provide two, let alone a wide range of services, as a family or community does.

Being artificial and limited, most groups rise and fall rapidly. Even when the groups themselves go on, their members come and go as their needs are served, or as they seek service elsewhere. Since groups are typically small, membership turnover affects their qualities. Thus, in most groups one can rarely tell if next year there will still be the same people, purpose or group climate. The diversity and numbers of groups available make up for their inherent instability. There's always another group to join — or form.

Secondly, groups, like wheels, are a great energy saver and economizer because the members provide one another, free of charge, with information, skills, and psychic support they would otherwise buy from experts. Groups are first of all

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or ought to be — mutual-help societies. Indeed, most groups are free, if one ignores the time spent in serving other members, and in hosting them occasionally. Those groups that do retain professionals get them at bargain prices, if costs are calculated on a per-person basis. (A therapist who charges $50 an hour, for example, might do a group of eight for $25 a person for two-and-a-half hours.) It might be said that each person gains less of the therapist's time and attention in the group situation as compared to the individual hour. But most comparative studies find no differences in the benefits of group versus individual therapy.

The power — and danger — of groups lie in that they all have a measure of social-psychic hold on their members. Part of the “hidden agendas” of a group is the emotional involvement that results from continued, repeated togetherness. Up to a point, the social ties that evolve are beneficial; they serve as an antidote to loneliness, a curse of the big city and modernity.

Most people need the warmth of continuous positive endorsement by others. (The experience of American POW's in North Korea and North Vietnam taught us that, when put in total isolation, cut off from all groups, most people experience severe deprivation and, after two or three weeks, serious psychic disorientation.) Some of us find it with our families, nuclear or extended; while others get it from their neighborhood or work. But with the weakening of the family and neighborhood and the rapid turnover at work, as well as a growing proportion of people (especially 65 and older) not at work, we look for additional or new sources of this vital psychic support.

So whether people rush to groups specifically for their psychic mains, or because they want whatever service they offer, taking the psychic stuff only as a bonus, we all can use it. (Hence it does not come as a surprise to the social scientist that the quiet neighbor next door, who never speaks or relates to anyone, might turn out to be a troubled, psychically disoriented person.)

Groups work most effectively when their bonds are rather strong, when their members are deeply invested in one another. Alcoholics Anonymous often does for alcoholics what psychiatrists often cannot do, precisely because the emotional bonds in A.A. are stronger and much more encompassing than in therapy, and help is available not just a few hours a week, but whenever needed, and for as long as needed. Some of the most effective drug-withdrawal groups are live-in, around-the-clock groups.

But there is a point at which group involvement can become too powerful and group control dangerous. A study of encounter groups by three social scientists found that 1 of 10 members (10 per cent) were “casualties,” suffering severe psychological aftereffects, including one suicide, compared with no such effects in the “control” group.

Potentially even more dangerous are groups that seek to monopolize the psychic involvement of their members, such as the Weathermen and the Moonies. Their members are required, or choose, to cut off all other groups and “outside” personal ties, to invest all their psychic affiliations in this particular group, so that the group is able to render them highly dependent on its orientation and, often, leadership.

Probably the best safeguard against excessive subordination to a group and its leader lies in belonging to more than one group. Nominal multimembership will not suffice; one must be truly anchored or involved in two or more groups. (One of these, however, might be one's family, friends or co-workers, while the other might be a special-purpose group or groups.)

I personally prefer still another type of group, an active or transcendental one. Such groups seek to serve the community rather than their own members. They range from upper-middle-class women monitoring telephones to help callers prod city agencies into action, to political activists seeking to curb pollution, promote honesty in government, or resolve the world hunger crisis. Members of these groups also have psychic needs, know loneliness and gain solace and support from one another. But here these are by-products of service for the common good rather than for the few group members.

There is nothing wrong with groups that serve their own members. (God knows there is enough that needs to be done.) But it is even more rewarding, at least for this activist, if some of the good also spills over into the community of which we are all a part.