

GROWTH IN SELF-ACTUALIZATION (PERSONAL ORIENTATION INVENTORY) IN ADULT ENCOUNTER GROUPS

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To test the efficacy of the Personal Orientation Inventory in assessing growth in self-actualization in relation to encounter groups and to provide a more powerful measure of such changes, pre- and posttest data from 3 highly comparable encounter groups ($N = 43$) were combined for analysis. Results indicated that the Personal Orientation Inventory is a sensitive instrument for assessing personal growth in encounter groups and that a larger total sample size provides more significant results than those reported for small samples (e.g., fewer than 15 participants).

Keywords: self-actualization, personal growth, encounter groups, group participation, Personal Orientation Inventory.

I examined growth toward self-actualization as a result of encounter group participation (Cooper & Kobayashi, 1976; Rogers, 1970). My hypothesis was that group members would have higher scores on a measure of self-actualization, the Personal Orientation Inventory (POI; Shostrom, 1974). My second purpose in conducting this study was to examine such results when testing a larger group population than usual.

I contend that the low-significance results obtained in prior self-actualization studies of this sort have occurred partially because small samples were used. For example, Knapp (1976) summarized 14 major encounter group studies involving the POI and revealed that when small samples (fewer than 15 participants) were used, significant changes were found in only 36% of possible instances, whereas in studies with larger samples significant results were obtained in 60% of cases.

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Method

Participants and Procedure

To obtain a larger sample while maintaining the small numbers necessary in the encounter group, I combined the results from three encounter groups conducted over the same period of time by the same facilitator who employed the same format and techniques. The groups comprised 13–15 volunteer adults ranging in age from 20–35 years. The total sample was evenly balanced in terms of sex ratio, although there was some variation from group to group. Each group took part in 12–13 sessions lasting approximately 1.5–2.0 hours per session.

The aims and methods for all groups were the same. Through taking part in structured activities—especially in the earlier phases of the group experience—and larger amounts of unstructured interaction, it was intended that group members would develop personal awareness of inner states and feelings, identify and express feelings, communicate more honestly and unambiguously, listen and show heightened sensitivity to the messages and feelings of others, seek and provide feedback on how one is perceived by others and how one's behavior affects others, and enhance the supportive, caring, yet authentic network of relationships within the group. Personal growth toward self-actualization was an expected outcome of the experience, so pre- and posttest measurement with the POI was used to obtain a more empirical assessment than subjective reports.

Measure

The POI (Shostrom, 1974) comprises 12 subscales: time competent (Tc: living in the present), inner directed (I: independent, self-supportive), self-actualizing values (SAV: holds values of self-actualizing people, e.g., "I live in terms of my wants, likes, dislikes, and values"), existentiality (Ex: flexibility in applying such values to one's life), feeling reactivity (Fr: sensitivity to one's own needs and feelings), spontaneity (S: ability to express feelings spontaneously), self-regard (Sr: positive sense of self-worth), self-acceptance (Sa: acceptance of self in spite of weaknesses or deficiencies), nature of man—constructive (Nc: sees man as essentially good), synergy (Sy: sees opposites of life as meaningfully related), acceptance of aggression (A: ability to accept anger or aggression in oneself as natural), and capacity for intimate contact (C: has warm interpersonal relationships).

Results and Discussion

Treatment effects were examined by computing group means, standard deviations, and one-tailed *t* tests of significance regarding differences

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between correlated means (see Table 1). A one-tailed test was considered appropriate, given the hypothesized growth in these variables.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Tests of Significance of Differences Between Means on Personal Orientation Inventory Scores

POI subscales	Pretest		Posttest		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Time competent	17.23	2.66	18.44	2.38	2.22	.02
Inner directed	87.42	10.82	93.88	10.09	2.87	.01
Self-actualizing values	20.21	2.56	21.23	2.13	2.02	.02
Existentiality	22.28	5.09	24.19	4.23	1.89	.03
Feeling reactivity	16.19	2.64	17.54	2.87	2.27	.02
Spontaneity	13.30	2.47	14.60	2.26	2.55	.01
Self-regard	12.09	2.61	12.88	2.43	1.45	.08
Self-acceptance	16.42	3.49	18.00	3.62	2.06	.02
Nature of man–constructive	11.60	1.85	12.14	1.58	1.44	.08
Synergy	7.63	1.02	7.67	0.92	0.22	<i>ns</i>
Acceptance of aggression	16.95	3.21	18.30	2.90	2.04	.02
Capacity for intimate contact	18.86	4.07	20.58	3.61	2.08	.02

Note. *N* = 43.

As I hypothesized, there was a significant positive pretest–posttest change in scores on 9 of the 12 subscales. On only one subscale (Sy) did the difference fail to approach significance. Thus, the POI appears to be a sufficiently sensitive instrument to measure certain aspects of growth toward self-actualization from this type of group experience.

Further, as predicted, the larger sample in this study did produce more significant changes than have been found in encounter group studies with small samples (i.e., fewer than 15 participants; Knapp, 1976). Likewise, in this study the larger total sample produced more significant changes than those that appeared in any of the individual groups involved.

Limitations to this study must be noted and it is hoped that continued research will answer certain remaining questions. There was no control group in this investigation. While Knapp (1976) indicated that studies of encounter groups without control groups show very similar results to those employing control groups (with little or no significant change in the control groups), a control group is still needed to lend strength to these findings. Likewise, a follow-up study would indicate the extent to which changes observed hold up over time. Despite these limitations, the observed changes do testify to the potential benefits of such an experience and the value of the POI in assessing these changes.

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